

FORGOTTEN REALMS

LADY OF POISON

THE PRIESTS



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The Priests: Lady of Poison

By Bruce R. Cordell

Decay has a power all its own.

When the healthy and whole softens, crumbles, and liquefies, an indefinable essence wafts away like putrid steam off stagnant beach sand. Decomposing flesh of what once lived radiates an essential energy in its dissipation. That power of dissolution can be siphoned by those with the proper cruel knowledge, and the appropriate twisted desire. The Rotting Man had both.

A crystal vase held a single flower, its petals the color of bone. The flower had only four petals, each knife-sharp and strangely heavy. The vase stood upon a slab of rough cut stone; it was an altar. There, in the heart of the Close, light penetrated, but not easily. Natural light was stained and filtered by petrified limbs and leaves of ancient trees whose hearts were pure rot.

A hand extended from the darkness toward the flower. The fingers, only a little less thin than the flower's stem, stroked a petal. The entire bloom turned black with decay in seconds, and fell, stinking, to the altar-top. Somewhere in the world, a servant died. Such was the power of the Rotting Man.

The Rotting Man was an artist of putrescence. For light, he had no use, unless he could squander its promise, turning light to malaise. In music, he preferred the decrescendo, always. Promotion was a rare event in the Rotting Man's organization, though the Blightlords, his foul lieutenants, did achieve their position through applied deceit.

The hand returned to the darkness, shaking just slightly. He was always in pain. Such was the price he paid for Talona's gifts.

A tangle of twisted thought sparked across the pits of his hungry mind. He sensed it then. It was coming. A prayer would soon be answered, the fulfillment of which would spell

his end. Soon. Any moment...

A ray of light fell secretly into the world, shining from a place so far beyond the sphere of the world that miles could not be used as a measure of distance. The light was a shaft of burning hope, let down to banish what shadows it could. The light was so fierce that it could scour evil with its mere presence. It sought the Rotting Man.

He laughed with rare pleasure.

The Rotting Man was ready. To him, the light's arrival was not secret. In fact, he anticipated it.

He recalled the years during which he had bred the perfect vessel to contain that light. Spilled blood, the trace of failed enterprise, and the mournful cries of dying prisoners shorn of freedom and dignity, all these he had incorporated into his living prison. Such a wonder of grotesquerie. Oh yes, the Rotting Man was more than ready; he was primed.

Whence came the light, he cared not. Containing it was all that mattered. Oh, the light was so optimistic, so imbued with good intentions, so ready to be corrupted by the Rotting Man. The sentient light was oblivious of danger when it arrowed down at him from heaven.

The golden ray was gulped down by the Rotting Man's living vessel in a single instant. Absorbed, but for a tiny glint that escaped his notice. A flicker of hope, shorn of the flush of full strength, fell to earth unmarked and enfeebled. Too enervated to retain knowledge even of its own origin, the remnant was accepted into the mortal world in a guise not intended.

The Rotting Man failed to realize that he had not captured the light in its entirety.

But eventually he began to suspect.

Autumn, 1368 DR

Ash-

Hemish nearly dropped the child. From her lips the word issued, as plain as day. He took a deep breath, and instead of dropping her, he stroked her baby-brown hair. He

continued along the road away from the small village, shaking his head. It was not the first time she had spoken.

Hemish was a man of simple means, a keeper of cattle. He had seen small magic, wonders, and the flashy spells of hedge wizards. He'd even once visited the city of Two Stars, and there witnessed a duel between feuding sorcerers, but a baby that could speak? Never had he heard of such a thing, but in his hands he held just such a wonder, though in truth, the only word she ever said was 'ash.' Not knowing whence she came, Hemish had taken to calling her the name that she repeated at odd intervals.

When he found her, she lay silent on a bed of emerald moss that grew up around her like a tiny cushion. She lay on her back, reaching up with her baby fingers as if attempting to touch the overhanging forest canopy. Appalled to see a child exposed to the elements, he scooped her up and brought her back to his home in the village straightaway. It was only later that she began to speak.

No local farmer or forest hunter had since appeared in town to lament a lost child. There was no claim at all upon her, save his own, and he was uncertain that he wanted to press it. He had decided to seek once again the glade where she first came into his life. Perhaps he could discover clues of her origin that he'd earlier missed.

He cradled the girl in his arms protectively, despite his unease. Tree branches waved idly in the late evening breeze, stirring up the scents of pine, loam, and forgotten days of sunshine. The faint smell of the child, babyish and powdery, put Hemish in mind of his own daughter, before she was grown and married away.

Soon enough he arrived in the glade where he'd found the child. All was as he remembered, though the season had advanced, and seedlings and other forest growth were failing with the year. He scuffed around with his boots, looking to kick up any item or other telltale clue hidden beneath the layer of pine needles. When he turned up

nothing, he moved to the base of the sapling where he'd found her.

His brows furrowed. The luxuriously soft bed of moss where he'd found her three tendays past was decidedly dead. What's more, it seemed afflicted with some brackish rot, which had eaten away at the heart of the bed before finally killing it. The rot had spread to the sapling, which drooped lifeless over the blackened moss bed. All in all, a nasty blight.

After a search of several minutes, Hemish admitted defeat. He could find nothing—he chalked the blight up to coincidence. He sighed, chuckled the baby on the chin, and made for town.

"Looks like it's going to be you and me after all, tyke," said Hemish, as he looked down into the face of the child.

The baby stared back with eyes the color of a cloudless sky. Guileless and pure they seemed, and Hemish felt his urge to protect the girl grow stronger.

It was a journey of less than an hour back to the village. In all that time, the child refrained from fussing or crying. Hemish headed straight down the main way. He turned a corner and spied Mause. Before he could make a break for it, her gaze locked on him. She stood in the middle of the road, leading a nag with a bedraggled mane. He pushed on, accepting the inevitable. Mause regarded him with a cruel turn of her lip as he moved closer.

At first, she was content to merely skewer him with her knowing gaze. Hemish cursed his weakness in asking the woman's advice on the child. How could he have guessed she was so superstitious and hateful?

He hurried on, making as if to pass her. He attempted to fix an expression of defiance on his own features.

As he pulled up even with Mause, she murmured, "She still talking?"

Hemish paused and sighed, "Yes. Only the one word, though."

As if to demonstrate to Mause, the baby in Hemish's arms said, "Ash."

As she did so, one of her infant hands reached toward the horse Mause led.

"What's she want?" scowled the woman.

Hemish moved a step closer to the bedraggled animal. Mause was not a particularly kind master, and the draft steed was obviously sick. If Ash wanted to feel the horse's mane, he saw no harm in it.

As the child's hands combed through the equine's tangled mane, a brilliant blue spark jumped between her fingers and horse. The horse raised its head suddenly, neighing! Its clouded eyes cleared then sparked with vitality. The matted hair in its mane smoothed. The creature nearly danced, as if restraining itself from rearing.

"By all the gods of hearth and home," Hemish mumbled, "what happened?"

He knew what had happened. The girl had the hands of a healer.

"Ash," she crooned in his arms.

Mause's expression, too, changed. Scorn made way for fear. The woman pulled her horse quickly away.

Spring, 1373 DR

The air was too warm for Marrec.

The link chain of his armor hung heavily on the padding he wore between the silver mail and his skin, causing sweat to bead and run. He removed a gauntlet, stuffed it into his belt, and mopped his brow. He felt the old scars beneath his fingers, scars hidden by his hairline. He hardly gave them a thought. After a lifetime of repressing those memories, recollections of his past rarely caught him off guard.

Marrec looked over at his companion who walked with him down the tree-lined road. He felt a little envious of Gungari, who didn't wear much of anything, save for a collection of strange tattoos, thick-soled leather shoes, and a breech-clout. Earlier, the noon-day sun's glare had been tempered

by a breeze, but the road had passed into a forested acreage. The trees stood tall on either side but failed to reach their branches across the gap of the road. The sun beat down through the gap, but the trees blocked the cooling breeze.

"Hot enough for you, Gunny?" Marrec asked his friend.

Gunggari shrugged and smiled. "Good weather for walking."

"Maybe, if you're not wearing fifty pounds of armor," snorted Marrec.

Gunggari Ulmarra was a strange one. Though he'd traveled with the southerner for over two years, Marrec was still unused to the man's disdain for the trappings of civilization, especially clothing. All Gunggari cared about was the long, stout wooden tube he carried, which he was currently using as a walking staff. Marrec had seen Gunggari use the thing as a warclub and a musical instrument with equal facility. Colorful designs dotted the tube's exterior. It was called a dizheri and was an object peculiar to Gunggari's home. Gunggari didn't talk much about the nation of his origin, other than to say he hailed from the far south "beyond the girdle of the world" in a place called Osse. There Gunggari was known as a tattooed soldier. Marrec wasn't sure if the name was a designation or a title, as in *The Tattooed Soldier*. The Oslander had never deigned to explain, and Marrec didn't push him on the topic, especially because so much time had passed since they took up traveling together.

"Ask Lurue a boon—perhaps a cooling breeze?" joked Gunggari.

Lurue was Marrec's patron goddess, to whom he owed fealty and from which he drew much of his strength. Because he was already annoyed by the heat, Marrec chose to interpret the statement seriously.

"Gunny, you know I can't waste her time for personal indulgences. Besides, it's getting worse." He admitted the last almost under his breath.

He sighed. Contact with his patron goddess, Lurue

the Unicorn Queen, was growing ever more difficult. Just to see if he could, he mentally probed for the connection that used to form as easily as shafts of sunlight find the forest floor...

Marrec nearly stumbled for lack of concentrating on the uneven path.

"Watch your step," grunted Gunggari. "The stones will catch your feet if you let them." The Oslander pointed ahead, where the path ascended quickly to the crown of a hill. The west flank of the hill was hidden in crowding pines and firs that cast long shadows over the rocky way. Gunggari gave him a sidelong glance, "Are you tired? We could stop for a rest, if you like, or—is something else bothering you?"

Marrec sighted. "Lurue's silences have grown, Gunny. Last night, I almost felt as if she were absent completely. When it came time for my nightly prayer of renewal..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That ever happened before?" quizzed Gunggari.

"No, at least not so completely. My connection has been deteriorating these last few years, like I said before, but this is the worst it's been."

"And... your vision?"

The Oslander referred to a dreamlike visitation Marrec had received several months earlier.

Gunggari continued, "Are we close enough that you can go without guidance?"

Marrec answered, "We're very close. I know that much."

The Oslander offered, "Perhaps her attention is being drawn elsewhere."

Maybe so. Where before the cleric had felt the presence of Lurue in every prayer, observance, and divine ritual, the presence had become uncertain, spotty, and sometimes altogether absent. Marrec shrugged. The cleric had met other servants of the Unicorn Queen, and while most seemed unaffected, a few reported feeling similarly to

Marrec. Those worst afflicted could no longer trust that the divine spells they cast in Lurue's name would return anew each day. Marrec suffered the same humiliation.

"Gunny, the vision was real. I didn't dream it, if that's what you're getting at."

The tattooed soldier raised both hands in a conciliatory gesture, said "I know, the 'Child of Light in Flemish's charge.'" My feet grow weary—I hope we find this Hemish in Fullpoint."

A vision had come to Marrec. From within the brilliance of a crescent moon, the silhouette of a unicorn spoke to him. The enchanting voice instructed him to seek the Child of Light and the child's guardian, Hemish. The voice indicated that finding the child would help both Marrec and one other in similar straits.

"I hope so, too," Marrec answered his friend.

Gunggari continued, "Even if it comes to nothing, I enjoyed our trip across the Sea of Fallen Stars. It nearly rivaled my trip across the Great Sea. I trust your last divination, the most recent one."

Marrec realized the Oslander was not needling him. Gunggari merely said what was on his mind, nothing more or less. As his friend said, his last pure divinatory contact with neglectful Larue pointed unerringly to the village of Fullpoint. Fullpoint lay several leagues west and somewhat south of a large city called Two Stars. They'd traveled along the trade road known as the Golden Way since debarking from their ship in Telf iamm. They had turned off southeast before reaching Two Stars, to Gunggari's disappointment. The visitors had been told that Two Stars was a city where Trade was coddled as if a favorite son, and nothing was forbidden.

Marrec said, "The closer we come to finding Hemish, and hopefully this mysterious Child of Light, the spottier becomes my contact. I doubt that Lurue does not want me to answer this riddle, and I don't think she is

becoming neglectful... I think that she is somehow being prevented from making contact..."

Marrec stopped speaking and cocked his head.

"Did you hear that?"

Faint cries and the ring of metal on metal echoed from over the hill. A thick stream of smoke tumbled up from behind the rise ahead. Something was burning, and it didn't look like a chimney.

"Let's go!" shouted Marrec.

Racing to the top of the hill, Marrec and Gunggari saw the source of the cries and smoke: a small village in the forest clearing was under attack. Creatures swarmed around the buildings, smiting villagers and setting fire to buildings. At first glance, the attackers seemed to be small animate trees.

"By the Ancestor," muttered Gunggari. The Oslander swept up his walking staff, ready for trouble, brandishing it like the warclub it actually was. He waited for Marrec's cue.

Marrec took a second to take stock.

The attacking creatures were not trees after all. In fact, they somewhat resembled humans, though their skin was the deep olive-green of a pine needle. Their flesh was woody and tough, but they all sported oozing sores from which a putrid slime seeped, as if they were slowly rotting. Their hair grew out in long, thick locks scaled like the bark of a young tree. Their eyes gleamed black with hatred. The creatures seemed somewhat familiar to Marrec, something he'd learned about in his training: they were similar to creatures called volodnis, but he didn't think true volodnis had such a sense of rot or decay about them as these oozing creatures had, but he was no expert.

Buildings continued to burn. Several humans and attackers lay wounded or dead in the village street. If the creatures had some goal, it wasn't apparent, unless it was simple mayhem.

A sickening realization occurred to Marrec. He said, "Gunggari... I think this is the village of Fullpoint!"

With that, he leaped down the other side of the hill, pulling his spear from where he kept it strapped to his back. Called Justlance, the spear tip was fashioned of gleaming adamantine in the shape of a regal unicorn horn. It was possessed of a potent enchantment that Marrec's past enemies had learned to fear, if they survived their initial meeting.

Gunggari followed Marrec but first raised one end of the long warclub to his lips. He blew down the hollow tube carved through the bole. A noise blazed forth. The sound, like a huge animal roaring or screaming—Marrec could never be sure—froze the volodnis and villagers alike with its hackle-raising ululation.

Marrec used the moment of distraction to run right up to one of the startled outlying attackers. The blighted thing had been in the middle of throttling a young farmer. Barely pausing in his dash toward the center of town, the unicorn warrior swept the tip of his spear across the volodni's neck. With a gurgling cry of pain, the creature flopped to the ground, oozing a combination of clear sap and black rot. Its former captive jumped back, gasping for breath, but Marrec was already running toward a larger concentration of attackers.

Gunggari was right on Marrec's heels. The tattooed soldier was far quicker than Marrec, especially without armor weighing him down, which proved lucky. A blighted volodni Marrec hadn't noticed jumped him from behind. Gunggari's warclub crunched against the creature's head, and the beast bleated and fell away from Marrec before it could do much more than scratch at his armor. Marrec darted a glance backward and saw that Gunggari had engaged the creature. He knew it'd take but seconds for Gunggari to dispatch an average foe. For all Marrec's physical prowess, he knew that the tattooed soldier was his better in straight-up combat, but not by much.

The other attackers began to respond to Marrec and

Gunggari's advance. Marrec could hear them calling to one another, warning of the counterattack. Their speech had the sound of pine-needles rubbing together in a strong wind. Ahead, the creatures began to mass. Other outlying attackers began to fade back into the trees.

It was difficult to estimate how many rot fiends had to be dealt with. Marrec spied more of the creatures running off into the trees that lined the town to the northwest. Good, the fewer he had to deal with the better. Unfortunately, a few braver creatures ahead were obviously prepared to receive their charge. Better take it slow.

"How many, do you think?" asked Marrec, pausing his headlong rush.

"More than ten, less than twenty," responded Gunggari, as he came up alongside.

"Like those odds?"

"I've faced worse."

"Then let's show these failed trees their mistake," exclaimed Marrec. "I'll take the right flank. You got left?" Gunggari nodded.

They charged. Marrec peeled off to the right, Gunggari left. The volodnis' force split roughly down the middle, but those making up Marrec's half failed to turn quickly enough to defend against his initial spear thrust. The spiral spear-head began to glow white, a light akin to the moon's glow, though it wasn't too distinct in day's full light. The first one went down with a spear thrust to the eye. Black rot spewed but failed to adhere to Justlance, just one of the advantages of a weapon blessed by a deity.

Two other creatures rushed forward where their brother had fallen. One attempted to duck under the shaft while the other offered a distraction. Marrec had been a spear fighter long enough to know that the first rule of the spear is to never allow an enemy to get under the range of the shaft. He backed up a step and choked up his grip. A slash across the creature's exposed stomach

ended its days. The other used that second to launch itself, but Marrec knew what he was doing. Without changing his grip, he swung the butt-end of the shaft around in a violent figure eight, catching the monster on the temple. The beast was stunned just long enough for another thrust. Another rot fiend down.

Something banged against his left shoulder hard enough to spin him half around. Another blighted volodni, a thick cudgel in hand, had appeared from the rear, landing a solid blow. Pain arced from his shoulder a second later, but it wasn't fast enough to stop him from downing the author of his discomfort with an expert thrust of Justlance.

Only four more were facing in his direction. He'd thinned them enough to tell that much. Behind them, a furious churning of limbs, clubs, and shouts showed that the tattooed soldier was still on his feet. Marrec had expected nothing less, but it wasn't the time to get cocky.

The villagers who'd borne the brunt of the attack were taking advantage of Marrec and Gunggari's advent to pull back from the conflict. Some had pails and were, shouting about the fire. Good. If they were quick enough, only a few outbuildings would burn.

"Marrec!"

The unicorn warrior's gaze snapped back to the fight. Apparently their foes had decided that splitting themselves between Marrec and Gunggari was a poor choice. They'd rectified it by concentrating all their attacks on Gunggari. The Oslander was pressed up against the wooden palisade, keeping his attackers at bay with crushing swings of his dizheri. Even as he watched, Gunggari batted one of the creatures back so hard that it actually flew several feet through the air before tumbling into a dead, oozing heap. The smell of putrid rot intensified. Another scored a hit with its cudgel, causing the Oslander to stumble.

Time to bring to bear another facet of Lurue's power.

While he reveled in his martial skill, the divine power Lurue

granted her servants was just as potent, or it had been, before the change. These days, each spell was hard won, and Marrec used them sparingly. Each one he used was a precious gift, that seemingly could no longer be replaced.

Taking one hand from Justlance's shaft, he began to inscribe a Sign of Capitulation in the air with one finger, drawing lines of burning fire with quick strokes. Before he could properly finish, a volodni menacing Gunggari glanced back, squealed, and tried to stick a sword in Marrec's belly.

Marrec had to abandon the spell before finishing the air rune.

"Curse you!" exclaimed Marrec, fumbling backward. That spell was hard won, and he wondered if he would be able to renew it or another of its potency with things being what they were. To see the spell wasted without effect made the unicorn warrior see red. "Rot take you!"

The blighted volodni followed up on its success by pressing its attacks with a series of wild swings, some of which landed. None pierced Marrec's silver mail, but each would leave a painful bruise.

"Think you've got me?" Marrec asked his attacker. Taking up Justlance in both hands, he knocked aside his attacker's blade, then completed the motion by driving the shaft a foot into the creature's breast. "Turns out, you're wrong."

In the meantime, Gunggari had eradicated a few more attackers. As Marrec moved in once more to help the Oslander, the remaining creatures broke off and fled toward the trees. Marrec launched his spear at the hindmost rot fiend. The shaft arrowed through the air and struck a volodni's retreating form at a distance of thirty feet. The force of the cast knocked the creature to the ground, pinning the beast where it lay. The volodni moved no more, though it commenced leaking a tainted fluid.

"You like risks," commented Gunggari, as the Oslander began to stoically clean the sides of his musical instrument-cum-warclub. "What if your throw had merely lodged in the

rotting one? He could have retreated with your weapon."

"The shot was clear, I knew I wouldn't miss. Besides, perhaps, even after all this time, you don't know all Justlance's abilities."

Gunggari raised one eyebrow. Marrec just smiled without elaborating. He was naturally lighthearted and preferred to focus on the positive, though internally he still cursed the loss of the Sign of Capitulation. He quickly paced the distance to where his spear still stood quivering in the form of the blighted volodni. The stink was unpleasant. Pulling the shaft free released an even stronger whiff of corruption which pushed Marrec back.

"Phew! These things aren't undead, but they are almost as rot-infested as an animated corpse."

"If not undead, then what? I assumed they were the work of necromancy," called Gunggari from where he stood, still cleaning his dizheri. Because it was his sole possession, the tattooed solider was never lax in the instrument's care.

"Don't know. Something bad, though," Lurue's cleric offered, grinning at his own understatement.

A few villagers, having saved what buildings they could from the fire, eyed Gunggari. It was obvious they didn't quite know what to make of the southerner. The Oslander pretended not to notice the looks as he finalized the process of returning the dizheri to an unblemished state.

Marrec walked toward two who seemed to have led the fire-extinguishing initiative, an older man and a stern, dark haired woman. As he walked up, the woman eyed him.

She said, "You have the thanks of Fullpoint, but if you're looking for a reward, I'm afraid the town's treasury was used earlier this spring to buy seed."

Marrec shook his head, "Nope. It was a deed done for pure purposes, and with the blessing of Lurue, the queen of goodly peoples and beasts everywhere. My name is Marrec, and I am Lurue's servant. My friend's name is Gunggari Ulmarra, and he is a traveler from far lands but a good soul."

"I'm Tansia; this is Korven," the woman said, pointing to the older man. "You have our thanks. Though we can't pay you in coin, we can put you up and feed you and your companion for as long as you wish to stay in Fullpoint."

"Very kind, Tansia, but perhaps you can answer me a question: I seek one named Hemish, Hemish of Fullpoint. Do you know this man?" Hope pitched Marrec's voice slightly higher than his normally smooth baritone.

The woman nodded, looking bemused, "Hemish? Of course. He keeps cattle. He lives just east of here on the town's edge. I can take you there."

"Please, lead on."

As they walked, leading a procession of the curious, Tansia asked, "Pardon my curiosity, Marrec, but what brings you to Fullpoint after Hemish? He is a simple man, and he and his daughter keep pretty much to themselves."

Marrec said simply, "He was revealed to me in a vision."

Tansia nodded uncertainly but said nothing more. In short order, she led him up to a home little different than many of the other village buildings. It, too, showed signs of the recent conflict. Marrec decided he didn't like the look of the bashed and ruined door, which hung off its hinges. He rushed up the two steps and looked inside. He had Justlance ready in case of lingering rot fiends.

An older man lay on the floor, bleeding, but alive, and conscious. His wild eyes met Marrec's. His mouth moved, as he tried to get something out.

Marrec knelt to tend the fallen man. "If you're Hemish, I've come a long way seeking you. I'll heal your wounds, don't worry."

Still the man, his white hair in disarray and eyes wild, tried to speak.

"What is it? What are you trying to tell me?" wondered Marrec.

Finally, Hemish spoke.

"They've taken her!"

V

CHAPTER 3

Hemish's pronouncement was unlikely to bode anything but poorly for Marrec's quest, but first things first. Marrec probed the man's wounds with an experienced hand. The worst was a head wound. The cleric would be able to dress the other gashes and scrapes with gauze and salve he kept for mundane hurts, but the head wound would turn ugly if left untended by anything less than divine cleansing. Marrec sighed. His resolution to conserve his divine spells in case he completely lost contact with Lurue was being tested. There was Hemish, whom he had sought on the goddess' inspiration. He was there because of a divine vision.

He laid a hand upon the fallen man's brow and whispered the words of power given him. The head wound ceased seeping blood as the puncture closed over as if it had never been. As the pain faded, Hemish blinked in surprise, but his mouth began to work, as if newfound health was the fuel he needed to launch into a yelling fit.

Marrec cut off Hemish before he could begin, "There. The pain should fade," said Marrec.

He helped the man to his feet. Hemish grew somewhat less wild about the eyes but remained quite agitated.

The man finally managed to yell, "Did you see her? My daughter? One of those tree men ran off with Ash!"

Daughter? Apprehension sent goose bumps stippling down Marrec's arms. Was this missing girl the Child of Light, stolen from him just as he was about to find her?

Hemish made as if to rush outside, but a pain more spiritual than physical seemed to unsteady the man. He began to pitch forward as if in a faint. Marrec reached out a hand to steady him.

"Easy. Rest a moment. We'll get her back," promised Marrec, as he righted a chair and helped Hemish to the seat. "Wait here."

Marrec ducked his head out the door. He located the

tattooed soldier who waited outside, who was fending off the thanks of grateful villagers.

"Gunggari—there's been a kidnapping—a child was taken from Hemish. I think... it might be the child we're seeking, but I don't know for certain. I need to speak further with this man. Can you get a bead on the kidnappers, quick?"

The Oslander nodded. Without a word he traced a path of footprints from the door of the home, slinking toward the trees where the volodnis had retreated, stepping quietly but moving with some speed. Experience with his friend's abilities told Marrec that Gunggari could track most anything, but he would wait for Marrec's help before launching any sort of counterattack or rescue. Marrec ducked back into the house.

The older man looked into Marrec's eyes and said, "Thank you. Why are you helping me? I don't even know you. My name is Hemish."

"Yes, I know. I'm Marrec, but that's not important right now. I have a pressing question for you, one I have traveled leagues to ask." Marrec paused for a breath. "Hemish, have you ever seen or heard of somebody or something called the 'Child of Light?'"

Thought creased Hemish's brow. He said, "Well, can't say that I have. Has it got anything to do with Ash?"

Intuition tickled Marrec, growing stronger. It was exactly the sort of feeling he had learned to trust as subtle guidance from the higher world. Marrec said, "Hemish, I believe that your daughter, Ash, is the Child of Light I seek, the child whom I've been seeking these long months."

Hemish looked at Marrec, nonplussed, and said, "Why? What's this business with 'light' and seeking? Ash hasn't done anything. She's normal, if a little slow in the head."

Marrec laid a hand on the man's shoulder and replied, "I assure you, I come with no sinister intent, exactly the opposite. The Child of Light is important to the goddess Lurue, also called the Wild Mother and Healing Hand. I am

her servant, and on her behalf, I've sought the Child of Light. If Ash and the Child of Light are one and the same, this can only be a joyous occasion."

"Joyous—what are you talking about? She's been kidnapped, I told you."

"I've never known Gunggari to fail. He'll find her. Meantime, I ask you, please tell me more of your daughter, Ash."

Hemish continued to think, looking up at Marrec, then fingering the wound Marrec had healed. It didn't take him long to reach a decision. More calmly than before, he said, "It doesn't surprise me that someone has finally come asking about her, actually. She is different, despite what I just said. She is special. I count myself the luckiest man alive that it was I who found her lying so helpless in the trees almost five years now gone past."

Marrec's pulse raised in tempo, "She's not your natural born child?"

"No. She's a foundling, but just as precious despite that."

A foundling... Marrec, too, had been raised by those who were not his real parents, he, too, having being found out alone in the elements by kindly people. Could there be some sort of connection? Marrec's fingers brushed at the scars hidden by his hairline, wondering.

"Does she... does she have a way about her eyes... or something not quite right about her hair?" asked Marrec, with a tentative note in his voice.

"Uhm, no. The strange thing is, she can speak. Well, speak enough to say a single word, even from the day I found her. Ash' is the word she says, and it's what I call her. That, and..." Hemish paused, gauging Marrec's reaction. "That, and her touch is magic. If you've taken a hurt or are feeling poorly, Ash's touch can grant you relief."

The healer's hand. Nothing like his own "condition," then. Marrec sighed. Still, if she was the Child of Light and somehow connected with the Unicorn Queen, her healing touch wasn't an ability completely unexpected.

"A healer. Truly, a gift from Lurue."

Hemish said, "She's my Ash, and she's been taken by those things. If she's somehow tied up with you and your god, it's funny that you show up just now, just as she's taken away from me. Maybe you drew those creatures here. What if you're to blame?" His voice cracked from strain and a sudden anger.

Marrec banished thoughts of his own young memories. First things first. The Child of Light was in immediate danger.

"Hemish, I'm going to find her. I'm going to save her from those creatures that took her from you, and I'm going to discover just what her connection is to Lurue and the goddess' growing silence. Right now, I value her safety above that of all others. You'll know soon enough if I succeed."

The unicorn warrior strode from the house. He'd spent enough time gathering information—more could be learned later when he'd secured the child's safety. Villagers were still gathered outside, talking about the events of the day. They quieted when Marrec exited Hemish's home. He waved to them as he quickly moved to the edge of the trees where Gunggari had darted into the woods.

Marrec called back over his shoulder, "I'm going to find Hemish's girl," for the benefit of queries he heard in his wake.

Within the shade of the first few trees, Marrec smiled. He found what he'd hoped—a tiny cairn of hastily assembled pebbles. Gunggari had left the marker indicating the direction he'd taken in tracking the blighted volodnis. That was a technique they'd used before. Marrec couldn't go nearly as quietly as the Oslander, but following markers, he could bring up the rear quickly enough.

Marrec strode confidently into the trees on the trail of Gunggari, fleeing volodnis, and he hoped, the Child of Light. How odd that she should be a foundling, just as Marrec had been.

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Tired and alone, the child waved his arms ineffectually and tried to crawl into the center of the empty road. He didn't know why he had been abandoned; he was too young to remember much. He ceased crying hours earlier. He was too tired and too hungry to cry. All that was left was dreary persistence.

When Harmon the cobbler found the infant, the child was nearly dead of exposure. Staring up at the newcomer who had intruded on his field of view, the child made a small sound, trying to give voice to his day of loneliness and cold. Only a whimper escaped the infant's lips.

Harmon was a good man and did the right thing. The cobbler brought the baby boy back into town. Harmon and his wife Celia nursed the young boy back to health and began to ask around as to the child's identity, but it was soon clear that no one would claim the lost boy. Apparently, he was an orphan.

Harmon named the boy Marrec and brought the foundling into his family. Already the father of six other children, the cobbler and his wife didn't make the decision lightly. Marrec was another mouth to feed and another responsibility for Harmon and Celia, but soon enough Marrec came to regard the kind man and his smiling wife as his real parents. Being only a year and a half old, unable to recall his past, where he had come from, or even how he had been abandoned in the wilderness, Marrec made that internal transition automatically.

Marrec grew into a healthy, inquisitive boy. Though raised as a brother, his older siblings always treated him a little differently, keeping him at something of a distance. That was fine with Marrec. He delighted mostly in the arts of sword, spear, and bow, though he also found solace in the wild. Marrec was particularly fond of the deer, the coyotes, and other animals of hill and glen. He kept many pets of that sort as he grew older, though his parents frowned on

anything more dangerous than a hare. His adopted brothers and sisters cared more for the arts of commerce, specifically cobbling, except for his step-brother Emmon. Emmon shared Marrec's passion for the wild, though he didn't share Marrec's facility with swords, staves, and other implements of the warrior. Emmon often accompanied Marrec on his treks out of town into the edges of the badlands. Growing up, Emmon was Marrec's closest friend.

Once Marrec and Emmon stayed out overnight on a dare. They set out, pockets bulging with hard rolls. Marrec had even thought to bring a waterskin filled from the well. Had the rain stayed away, their short overnight trip would have gone unremembered, but the rain did come that night, and with it a drop in temperature so extreme that the two boys were forced to seek shelter. They found a small cave, as had a mountain bear who was not eager to share.

The bear swiped Emmon across the shoulder, adding a flow of blood to the rain's deluge. The attack's brutality tumbled Marrec back out into the rain with his step-brother. Emmon lay moaning off to the side, while Marrec lay sprawled not more than a few feet from the cave. His hands scrabbled across the rain-slick forest floor. As the bear emerged from the cave-mouth to finish off the two intruders, one of Marrec's hands closed about a thick wooden shaft. Knowledge flashed into his head—he knew what he had to do to survive the next two seconds. As the bear lunged, he pulled the broken tree branch up, aiming the pointed end at the descending bear, allowing the other end to remain butted into the earth. The bear plunged onto the shaft, sorely wounding itself.

After it ran off roaring through the rain, Marrec crouched over Emmon. The rain turned his black hair into a sodden mass that drained rivulets of water into Marrec's face, but his hands were steady as he ripped strips of cloth from his own tunic and bandaged them around Emmon's shoulder to

stem the oozing blood. Marrec's eyes burned like coals, but at that time he assumed it was pent up frustration...

Marrec saved Emmon, and both survived the punishments given them by their parents for their foolishness. When Marrec reached his sixteenth year, he took a commission with the village militia, such as it was. Though his adopted father would have preferred Marrec enter the family business, he was supportive of his son's decision. After all, Marrec was something of a natural when it came to the arts of the warrior. Though far less suited, Emmon followed Marrec's example.

CHAPTER 4

The crash of metal and a gurgling roar startled Marrec from reverie. He hadn't gone more than a mile since leaving Fullpoint behind. Thrusting aside the forest growth without further regard for stealth, Marrec rushed forward several dozen feet. His dash ended as he broke out of the trees into a shaded glade.

He arrived in time to witness Gunggari slam his warclub into a rot fiend's head. The blighted creature was one of half a dozen more pustule-ridden forest folk assembled in the glade in various postures, all inimical, though a few lay unmoving near Gunggari. Glad though he was to see his friend, his eyes darted past the Oslander. Standing plain as day was a massive lion-like beast whose skin was so encrusted with fungus that it seemed a shade of green. Marrec estimated that the lion stood six feet tall at the shoulder. The beast screamed, giving voice to the same shattering roar that Marrec had first heard. It was rooting after something caught in the bole of a large tree.

"By the Circle of Leth, you shall not have her!" called out a female voice.

A woman in warrior's garb dropped into view from above the dire beast, swinging a leaf-shaped blade. She had been hiding in the tree. Her fall was purposeful; she struck the fungal lion a nasty blow with her blade as she fell past. Her

precipitous drop ended in an expert roll that not only cushioned her impact but also put her just out of range of the beast's first claw swipe. Marrec didn't know who the woman was, but she already had his respect.

Then he saw the little girl behind the tree. She had to be Hemish's foundling, Ash.

Marrec bolted forward, trying to skirt the volodnis. Gunggari would be able to deal with them. He hoped. Marrec doubted that the valorous woman would do as well against the savage beast without some help. It was his cue to act.

A bolt of black rot diverted Marrec. One of the rot fiends was tossing around potent magic. The bolt missed, striking an old tree stump. The stump immediately began to rot and molder. Marrec hoped the courageous woman could hold out a few more seconds against the beast. He first had to deal with the blighted forest creature that was versed in sorcery, and not a pleasant sort of sorcery.

He pointed his spear at the one who'd cast the enchantment his way, saying, "Leave, and we'll let you go without harm."

The one he pointed to sneered, breaking open a fluid-filled boil on its face as it did so. "It is you who should leave. We require the Horned Aspect. Lest blight take you, deliver her!" Horned Aspect? He'd worry about that later. Too many names to match up with faces, though he wondered if the creature referred to Ash. He decided that his job of the moment was to see that the sorcerer ate its words.

Almost of its own accord, Justlance took flight. He knew even as the shaft left his grasp that it would speed true. He had just time enough to see the sorcerer's filmy eyes widen before another volodni knocked him to his knees with a blow from behind. Where'd that little stinker come from?

He tried to spin around and back, though it was difficult on his knees. His immediate aggressor clutched an iron-headed mace. It grinned. "Too bad you had to kill Molkai," it said, gesturing to where the sorcerer volodni was pinned to a tree by Justlance. "Now I kill you, easy."

The mace-wielder had no way of knowing Marrec's secret, so when the rot fiend's triumphant charge ended suddenly on the point of Justlance, its look of surprise before it expired was absolutely justified. An instant prior to stopping the charge, Justlance left the quivering body of the nearby volodni sorcerer. His spear could never be parted from its owner for long.

Gunggari had about mopped up the last of the remaining volodnis. Marrec levered himself to his feet and looked for Ash... Ah! The child still sheltered partly behind the roots of the large tree. Ash's unknown female protector was also still in the game, rushing in to hack at the fungal lion, then dancing away just in time to avoid a lethal claw swipe. If the creature hadn't been so focused on going back for the child, Marrec wondered if the woman would have fared so well. Each time it broke off its pursuit of the woman, she slashed it again with her blade. Still, she was obviously tired, while the greened lion seemed as strong as ever despite several lines of its own blood on its sides and some quantity of the same squalid fluid the volodnis leaked.

"Let's get the cat, Gunggari!" shouted Marrec as he dashed in on the lion's flank.

The woman heard him, too. As he came up behind and to one side of the lion and gave it a good jab with his spear, she closed on the opposite side, her leaf-shaped sword stabbing and slashing. The lion turned and swatted at him with a huge claw, green with rot, but he got out of the way. The woman got in another few telling blows, taking advantage of the creature's divided attention.

Gunggari finally showed up, his dizheri soaked and matted with evidence of its recent work. He swung it around with both hands, connecting solidly with the side of the creature's head. It yelped, blinking, and shook its head.

"It's dazed," yelled the woman. "Finish it!"

Marrec didn't need to be told twice. He and Justlance got to work. With another mighty bash from the dizheri, the lion

collapsed, unmoving.

In the ensuing quiet, Marrec and Gunggari eyed the woman. Dressed in sturdy brown and green leathers, she looked like she was more than at home in the forest. Of course! Her thin build and elongated features—she was an elf, though her hair hid the most tell-tale sign.

Marrec said to her, across the length of the unmoving lion, "I am Marrec. Gunggari," he inclined his head toward the Oslander, "and I chased these monsters down. They kidnapped a child from a village they attacked." He gestured back toward the girl. "Her father will be overjoyed to discover your part in saving her. Thank you."

The elf smiled in acknowledgement but said nothing. She looked over to where Ash sheltered.

Ash had left the tree's shadow and walked tentatively up to join them. All eyes fixed on the frail girl dressed in a simple peasant dress.

The girl glanced at each of them for a second, and said, "Ash."

She looked to be between four and five years of age.

The unicorn warrior looked the child over for injuries. She seemed unscratched. Poor little tyke. He ruffled Ash's hair. The girl merely looked at him, staying silent.

No doubt she was still frightened by her recent kidnapping. He felt an instant fatherly affection for her, partly because he couldn't help identifying with her. They were both orphans, though of course he wondered if her actual origin could be as strange as his own.

"What did she say?" wondered the elf.

"Ash is her name," indicated Marrec, looking to the girl then back to the woman.

The elf figured out his unspoken question. She smiled again and raised her sword to her brow, as if a salute. "I am Elowen. I am a Nentyar hunter in service with the Circle of Leth. I've been trailing these volodnis for some time, trying to find out more about their recent incursions."

Marrec was unfamiliar with most of those names. He decided to pursue the rot fiend topic. "They look like volodnis of which I've heard, but there is something wrong with these," he said, pointing at the corpses.

"Yes," continued Elowen. "These poor creatures suffer from an infection of body and mind. When unafflicted, we call them the pine folk, too. They normally live in the Lethyr Forest, the Rawlinswood, and the forests of Rashemen. These are a fair bit south of their natural ranges."

"I've heard of volodnis but never seen them before," responded Marrec. "I've heard that they can be vengeful protectors of the forest. Perhaps the people of Ash's village somehow riled them up?"

Elowen rubbed her jaw and said, "Well, they can be antagonistic to the 'warm folk' as they call us. But I assure you, as a servant of the Nentyarch, I've dealt several times with volodnis, and none are like these. Volodnis do not normally rot as if dead but continue to draw breath. These are..."

"They are evil," finished Gunggari.

She nodded, then looked to Gunggari and back to Marrec. "If you haven't seen volodnis before, you must come from far away."

She grinned, looking again at Gunggari. "Especially you."

The Oslander offered a tiny smile back at her, said, "Far, far to the south was my home. Where I come from, everything is different. I am an explorer."

"Indeed. And you?" Her gaze was back on Marrec.

Marrec answered, "I hail from the west, where I serve the goddess Lurue. I am here because ... this child is somehow important to the goddess, though I have as yet no understanding of how that could be."

Elowen rubbed her palms together. "Let us compare stories, and perhaps some pieces may come together for all of us."

"Great. Let's start with why you were trailing these creatures," said Marrec.

Elowen replied, "As I said, this rot is not something volodnis have exhibited before. As an agent of Leth, it is my job to protect the forests for the Nentyarch. If the volodnis are suffering from disease or have leagued with evil, I need to know. That's why I'm here following this particular group. Plus, I have a friend up in Two Stars who promised to help me out. She owes me."

"Whoa ... slow down," said Marrec. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Explain it to me as if I were a complete stranger to your land." He let a smile touch his lips.

"Sure. The Forest of Lethyr to the northwest of here is home to the followers of the Nentyarch. The Nentyarch is a very, very powerful druid, and he and his followers are collectively known as the Circle of Leth..."

"And the Nentyar hunters serve the Circle, right?" guessed Marrec.

"Right. I'm a hunter. We're a group made up of rangers, scouts, and warriors. We carry out the commands of the druid circle voluntarily, for the good of the forest. When we join in service, we swear to defend the great forests and do the Nentyarch's bidding."

"My goddess Lurue has often found common ground with druids," offered Marrec.

"Her name is one honored by the Circle, I've heard. What brings a servant of Lurue so far east?"

"Her silence," muttered the cleric.

Elowen waited for more.

"Something is not right with Lurue. I've been following portents, looking for a promised Child of Light who will... somehow make things right. I think Ash is the child, but now that I've found her, I'm not sure what to do next."

Gunggari said, "These evil pine men are caught up in Ash's fate and maybe Lurue's. If we discover the pine men's interest, maybe we can find out why she's important to Lurue."

"A lot of maybes," opined Marrec, "but I have nothing better

to go on. Ash is not talking at the moment." He patted the mute child on the head. "We need to find out more about these blighted volodnis—these rot fiends." He looked back at Elowen.

"Agreed," said Elowen. "You are welcome to join me to see my friend in Two Stars. She is an adept of many lores, and she may know something about these volodnis. Then I must report back to the Nentyarch. It's been too long since I've gone back... but Ususi should be consulted, now that we have this new information in hand."

"Ususi is your friend?"

"Ususi Manaallin. She also hails from a place far distant from here. She came here long ago, and her knowledge of certain mystical sites of the forest is unsurpassed, even by the Nentyarch himself. She knows the Mucklestones especially well."

"Why do we care about mucklestones?" wondered Marrec. "Because, these blighted volodnis I have been following issued from that ancient site just over a month ago. I witnessed their departure. Of late, I've spent much time in the vicinity of the Mucklestones..." The elf smiled fondly as if over some personal memory. "Anyway, something evil has taken root in the Mucklestones, and of all the people I know, Ususi best knows the Mucklestones. She has made their study her work."

"Exactly where are the Mucklestones located?" asked Marrec, that time pronouncing the name with the proper gravity. The place seemed like it must be important and perhaps somehow connected to Ash, and if so, then also to Lurue.

"They are at the northeastern tip of the Forest of Le-thyr. The city of Two Stars is not too far out of the way, if the Mucklestones prove to be our eventual destination."

Marrec considered, still standing close to the child. The girl looked at him, saying nothing, and reacting not at all to the field of slain creatures around her. If Ash truly was the Child

of Light, whatever the true significance of that name, and if the volodnis were after her because of it, she wouldn't be safe back in her village. She'd be safest with him, Gunggari, and perhaps with the hunter Elowen. After all, Elowen had already saved Ash once.

Marrec decided. "Gunggari, we're going to Two Stars. Ash is going with us."

"What about the peasant, Hemish?" wondered the tattooed soldier. "He will want his daughter back."

"Don't worry, we'll go back and satisfy Hemish that the girl will be safest in our care. If he truly wants what's best for the child's welfare, he'll allow her to remain with us. It may be that Ash is blessed with a secret, perhaps even the secret behind Lurue's silence."

It was decided. Elowen indicated she'd accompany him and Gunggari back to Fullpoint, being grateful for their help in slaying the evil pine folk, and hopeful that their involvement might aid her efforts in the future.

The blightlord laughed as the druid's screams bellowed forth. The druid, named Briartan, was convulsed with pain, though his strength was sufficient to keep the blightlord's awful infection at bay.

Still chuckling, the dark figure regarded Briartan where the druid was impaled, a metal stake puncturing the palm of each hand so that the druid hung against one of the sacred obelisks of the stone circle. Though a filigree of rot frosted the stone all around the druid, Briartan's body remained uninfected, if bloody.

The blightlord, named Gameliel, asked "Still resist, do you? It matters not, really. I already know everything you are trying so hard to avoid telling me." So saying, the figure extended the night black haft of its horrible weapon and gently lifted the necklace bearing the Keystone from around Briartan's head.

The druid kicked out with his leg, striking his evil tormenter in his armored chest. "You can't have it, Gameliel."

The blightlord snarled. Gameliel lashed forward with the weapon's void-dark blade. He severed Briartan's offending leg with a single swipe.

The severed limb slid limply down the stone slab from which Briartan still dangled, pumping blood. The druid's scream ripped forth once more, echoing among the encircling stones, but dying away to nothing in the branches of the surrounding forest.

A new master ruled the Mucklestones.

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Back in Fullpoint, Hemish proved difficult to persuade.

"Are you joking, man? Leave my daughter in your care? I thank you for returning her, but after all, you are a stranger to me and her!" yelled Hemish.

Marrec, sitting across the table from Hemish, studied the dancing flame of the single lamp hanging above the table.

He and Hemish had gone back and forth for some time, but it didn't feel like he was getting through to the man. The child Ash sat in a small chair nearby, her legs dangling above the floor, a stuffed toy languishing in her lap as she stared straight ahead at a sight only she could see.

Marrec leaned toward the peasant and said, "Listen. Can't you see that this is not a singular occurrence? If it happened once, it could happen again, and we won't be here next time to save her."

Hemish glowered and muttered, "How many times can a man's child be taken? The odds were long to begin with. Lightning doesn't strike the same place twice."

The cleric sighed, shaking his head. "True—if this were only a random occurrence. Haven't you heard a thing I've said? I believe these tree people were specially seeking Ash. They didn't succeed. That means they'll try again. And again and again until they finally get what they're after. My friends and I cannot stay here to guard here night and day—we have business in Two Stars. If you truly care for the safety of your daughter, you'd wipe the sentiment from your eyes and see

the truth. Allow me to protect her. I swear I'll guard her as my own."

Hemish took one of the girl's unresponsive arms in his own. He looked into Ash's eyes, and said, "Is that all right with you, baby? Do you want to go with this man? You'll be safe. Tell me what you want."

The girl intoned, "Ash."

Hemish's eyes brimmed. He patted the girl's hand then caught Marrec's eyes with his own. "You swear on your service to your goddess that you will keep Ash safe from all harm?"

Marrec rose, drew Justlance and held it before him. He said, "I swear, upon Lurue's name, that I shall guard Ash with all my ability, keeping her safe from harm. She will be more dear to me than my own life. I so swear."

Hemish sighed. After a minute of silence he said, "Very well, cleric. I must trust you, it seems."

Marrec reached out and clasped Hemish's hand. He said, "You are making the right choice. Don't worry."

Really, there could be no other outcome.

They spent the night in Fullpoint. In the morning, Marrec, Gunggari, Elowen, and Ash departed. Much of the village was gathered to see off the heroes who had defended the town from the "raiding tree people." Many did not understand why Ash was departing, too. Few seemed unduly upset by it save, of course, for a tearful Hemish.

When all the goodbyes were said, they headed out. Elowen led the group northeast. Their destination was Two Stars. Marrec's single hope was that Elowen's friend might shed light on the question of Ash's identity. What was the significance of the Child of Light, and how had the volodnis fallen into the clasp of evil?

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Joining the militia seemed to be one of the best moves of Marrec's young life. He reveled in the weapon drills, the warrior's training, and the endless mock duels with the other

young men of the village with similar hearts.

Not so Emmon. Though quick enough with his wits, Marrec's step-brother wasn't too swift when it came to arms and armor. The drilling required of all those in the militia made little dent in Emmon's inability to properly wield a sword. Emmon and Marrec were thick; Marrec helped Emmon perfect his skills, while Emmon was happy just to be around Marrec. They were friends.

When not training in the militia, Marrec and Emmon enjoyed taking short walks outside of the village, to the edges of the forest and sometimes past. The two boys made a contest of who would be the first to sight some small game animal, tree, or other interesting feature of the Wild. They had a favorite haunt near the edge of the river, where a small cave provided the perfect hide-out

from adults and the responsibilities expected of those coming of age.

The raids started around that time.

Horrible creatures out of the wild found the village, and for reasons of their own, they decided it would make an ideal target of terrorism and piracy. The raiders were a tribe of brutish, manlike ogres who called themselves the Durang, after their leader. Not interested in concessions, the Durang launched a career of attacks on the town. At first just outlying farms were hit, but it was clear that the Durang were intent on striking to the very heart of the village, and soon.

So it was time for the militia to do the job it had trained for. Defend the village. Marrec looked forward to the coming encounter with a strange, tight feeling in his stomach. He looked forward to being tested in actual battle, yet he was nervous. He didn't let that show to his comrades, who were all outwardly afraid. Emmon put on a brave face, but Marrec knew his brother well enough to know that on the inside, Emmon was just this side of fleeing for all he was worth.

The crash on the hastily-constructed palisade wall signaled

that the time for wondering was past. It was time to fight. Another crash, and the Durang were through. Some of his fellow militiamen were stunned, thinking that the barrier should have lasted longer. No time for that. Yellow-skinned brutes with thick, warty skin boiled in through the breach. Marrec was among the few brave enough to meet the initial onslaught. He had chosen a spear, which he judged he could use more profitably against the eight-foot-tall Durang. Plus, ever since the incident with bear in the woods, Marrec simply preferred the spear.

A particularly ill-kempt brute with greasy hair charged him, brandishing a great club of splintered wood. Marrec felt fear melt away before the immediacy of his predicament. Fear would only get in the way of the actions he must take in order to survive.

He ducked under the monster's first swing, jumped up instantly and drove his spear into the Durang's temple. Just like that, the creature was vanquished. Marrec yelled in jubilation, wrenching his spear free from the carcass.

"Who's next? he wondered.

Things weren't going nearly so well for the rest of the militiamen. Even one Durang was a match for two or three humans, and there were at least eight ogres by Marrec's count. Over to his left, the drillmaster Rimmard stood his ground well enough, but everywhere else the Durang encroached. Not a single militiaman was uninjured, except for himself and maybe Rimmard.

His eyes found Emmon. His half-brother lay twisted, unmoving, his broken sword several feet from his splayed grip. "Emmon?" Marrec rushed to the body of his stepbrother.

Emmon was dead.

Rage took Marrec. The boy felt his own humanity splinter and fall away, as if it were snake skin. His eyes had started burning the moment the attack began. Seeing his dead brother, it felt as if the very orbs were afire. Marrec

screamed, clutching his head with both hands. His head felt molten, and his eyes brimmed with the blaze inside.

Why not let the anger out? something whispered. Why not? Marrec allowed his hands to fall away from his head. Despite the pain, his gaze was infused with a deadly clarity. As if burrowing a channel in the air with his gaze, he unleashed the fury within at the ogre nearest the fallen body of Emmon, but the ogre was not burned.

It was turned to stone.

A great hush extended from the first unmoving ogre, growing in radius like a rock dimples a pond, ever-widening as defenders and ogres alike paused to see what had occurred. A long sigh was heard, or maybe it was a collective gasp of fear from villagers and attackers, as startled eyes alighted on Marrec then flinched quickly away. Then the remaining raiders were running, running from his invincible gaze. He cared not. He was in a swoon of anger and loss.

Emmon still lay dead at Marrec's feet. His gaze was spent, and the fury subsided to a dull ache deep within his head. All was silent. Villager gazes continued to scatter away from him like water on a hot skillet, afraid to commit. A murmur of astonishment grew, but more than just astonishment, there was also fear. Fear of him. The freak. The monster.

So he was. The bitter truth was apparent to all. The townspeople wanted nothing more to do with him, despite his victory over the Durang. His blood was tainted with an unknown but likely devilish power, he was told. He was outcast, even by his own family.

So it was that Marrec fled into the Wild.

CHAPTER 5

Yhey sought the city of Two Stars, Elowen in the lead, the rest following after.

Marrec tried to carry Ash piggy-back, but she seemed more comfortable walking, so their pace in the lightly forested country was measured to the pace of a young child. Marrec

knew that would have to change, but he was willing to allow the child her head for the moment. Perhaps later they could purchase a small horse or pony for the girl to ride upon.

Elowen was familiar with the country and could get them back on the road called the Golden Way without backtracking along the path Marrec and Gunggari had used to reach Fullpoint. Marrec knew little of the land, but he was learning more with each day. He did know that the city of Two Stars girdled the Golden Way and was an important city in the land of

Thesk, which was the ungainly name of that far land where Marrec found himself.

Marrec reflected back on his journey since he'd reached the eastern shore of the Sea of Fallen Stars. He and Gunggari had first disembarked in the city of Telflamm after their passage east across the Sea. Telflamm was the founding city of the Golden Way. For thousands of miles the great trade road wended eastward, eventually joining Faeriin to the fabulous lands of Kara-Tur, Marrec was assured. Along the road lay the merchant towns that comprised the realm of Thesk, the crossroads of the Unapproachable East. All that was revealed to Marrec upon landfall, but he wasn't sure he believed much of what was told him in the thief-ruled city of Telflamm. At the time, he just wanted to find Fullpoint, though he did recall seeing a map showing Two Stars situated not much farther along the great trade road.

While on the great trade road, they'd passed through countless smaller villages, and three larger cities, Phent, Phsant, and Tammar. The towns of Phent and Tammar had offered no trouble, but in Phsant their ignorance of local custom had caused a few problems. Somehow—Marrec wasn't sure exactly how—Gunggari had earned the displeasure of someone called the Golden Master. Marrec didn't really worry about it until they discovered hundreds of soldiers loyal to the Golden Master mustered against them as they attempted to exit the city from the strangely named

Shou quarter. They'd barely escaped. One thing was sure—he and Gunggari wouldn't be going back through Phsant if they could help it.

Marrec hoped Two Stars wasn't all that far from Full-point. Surely it would be a quick journey, at least after he made some sort of arrangement for Ash's transportation.

Perhaps he should consult with their guide.

"Elowen?" called Marrec from the rear. He was making certain that Ash walked ahead of him, never allowing the girl out of his sight. "How far to Two Stars did you say?"

Elowen paused in her conversation with Gunggari, looking back. Marrec was glad to see those two seemed to be getting along. "No more than a couple of days, Marrec; it's about sixty miles. Not to worry. This foliage gives way to grassland soon enough. If we were traveling through a real forest, like the Lethyr or Rawlinswood, you'd know it."

Marrec nodded, satisfied.

Elowen walked, excited at her chance meeting in the wood. Her senses were attuned to the wildlife of leaf and bough, but more than others of her order, she enjoyed conversation. Sadly, the creatures and plants in her care were mostly unskilled in that area. These strangers had many stories to tell and offered the chance for conversations many and long. More importantly, the strangers were concerned with the troubles of the wood, just like her. They seemed specifically concerned about the troubles caused by these rot-touched volodnis, as was she. She feared that where blight moved so fearlessly, only one possible agency could be responsible... but she had to be sure before she reported back to the Circle. That was a conversation she did not relish. She had stayed away far too long—and the longer she stayed away, the more difficult it had become each day to set her feet back toward her fellows. After all, she had been pursuing her mission, however delayed it had become.

"The trees are yours to guard?" asked Gunggari, who walked

beside her on the road to Two Stars.

"Not quite," responded Elowen. "Nentyar hunters, such as myself, are few. We don't patrol specific areas. Rather, we are free to wander widely, trusting our own judgment, but yes, we confront all who seek to harm the forest."

Gunggari fell quiet, apparently satisfied.

The southlander was a puzzle to Elowen, but an interesting puzzle. She'd never seen anybody like him. A human, to be sure, but one with customs unlike she'd ever come upon before then. He intrigued her. She hoped they would accompany her back to the Mucklestones. Her friend Briartan would love to meet someone from so far abroad.

"What about you?" Elowen asked the tattooed soldier. "What is the significance of all those marks on your body? They seem too exquisite to be mere decoration."

Gunggari considered a moment, then said, "In Osse, in the land where my mother bore me, these tattoos speak of my strength, skill, and dedication to alcheringa."

Elowen looked at Gunggari, waiting for him to continue.

"Alcheringa is the philosophy of my people. I walk that path. These marks on my body are totems, each telling of an ancestral hero of my people. I call on them for aid when I am in need. That is alcheringa".

"Who's this one?" Elowen impudently pointed at a vaguely human tattoo on Gunggari's chest. "He's got a warclub like yours."

"Tumbarum. He is the spirit of music. He plays the dizheri. Like so."

Gunggari hefted his hollow war club, upon which were painted elaborate designs in bright colors, and began to blow through one end. A sound, as of thunder, or a rushing river, reverberated through the air. Startled, a nearby flock of birds gave flight. The sound was unlike anything she had ever heard. Gunggari continued to blow. The thought occurred to her that it was music of a sort the elves had never mastered, something she could scarcely credit. His

warclub was a musical instrument. Truly a marvel.

After a time, Gunggari finished. Elowen said, "You are a master musician, Gunggari. Among my people, you would be accorded much honor for that alone."

The Oslander stowed his instrument and nodded, taking her at her word, without humility or arrogance. Gunggari was simply a man who knew his worth.

He said, "You have made my friend Marrec very happy, appearing when you did, saving the child. He has long sought that child; you have made a friend of him and me."

So saying, Gunggari clapped her on the shoulder.

Such familiarity between herself and strangers was uncommon, and normally she would resent such contact, but she was surprised to find that, coming from the strange man from the south with his strange customs, she didn't mind.

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A pony named Henri was procured for Ash in the village of Culdorn that evening. The group had covered just fifteen miles, but they did reach the great trade road, the Golden Way. They put up that night in the Culdorn Inn. Ash was completely taken with Henri; she was far more interested in the little horse than with her companions. The girl tried to sleep with the pony in the stable instead of the room they arranged for her and Elowen to share. That was, by far, the most emotion the child had yet generated for anything, and Marrec was pleased. Perhaps the mount would prove a bridge by which Ash could be reached.

The next day the four traveled swiftly down the Golden Way. Henri was amenable to the pace set. Elowen and Gunggari were used to traveling light and quickly, but Marrec, too, could move fast when necessary. Before the sun dipped down on their flank, sending their shadows ahead like dusky fingers, they covered a full thirty miles. Elowen indicated they had only a half day's travel to look forward to the next day.

They made camp alongside the road that night. Elowen got a fire going with Gunggari's aid in scavenging suitable brush and dead branches. Tiny sparks drifted up from the fire, blending with the stars above. Gunggari told a story drawn from the mythology of his people, as he sometimes did, but only with much cajoling from Marrec. That night, he launched into the telling on his own initiative. It was a story about rain.

CHAPTER 6

Rain woke Marrec in the gray light of dawn. Clouds scrolled across the sky, brushing water in great grey arcs across the soggy landscape. He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, the water from his hair, then stood to check on Ash. They'd rigged a simple lean-to for the girl, which had kept out most of the rain. She still slept under its protection, curled up in her blanket. Henri stood protectively nearby, his coat damp and curled. Marrec could smell the beast's damp fur—distinctive, but not unpleasant.

Elowen and Gunggari were up, too, striking camp. Despite the gloom rain normally evoked in Marrec, he was excited to be up and on his way. Two Stars was close.

The countryside was as pleasant an example of Faerun countryside as Marrec had ever seen. Perhaps it was the rain, but the pastures had

a radiant greenness, like stained-glass windows. There were a few tall pine trees, and larger, uncut copses, that served as reminders that once a much greater forest existed thereabout. In places, cream-colored stone was visible rising out of the soil. The forest had given way to crops and pastures.

Later, the rain dried up, though the countryside remained clammy and misty. Elowen was good at her word, and before noon they spied the gates of Two Stars. The Golden Way passed into the city, then along the great curve of the city's inner wall. It appeared as if much of the road within the city was a great trade bazaar. Within the gates he spied many

buildings, some temples, and one large castle. At one point, the Golden Way appeared to veer away from the city wall and actually pass through the gates of the castle and out the other side. Within the gates of the castle, the trade route bisected another large road. Marrec thought that it might be the Cold Road, if his memory of maps he had studied was accurate.

"Who holds the castle?" asked Gunggari.

Elowen answered, "That's Gallidy Castle. Lady Yolatir Gallidy is the latest to govern Two Stars. She's not especially heavy handed, and lets the trade flow pretty much unhindered. As you can guess, she's a favorite of the guilds."

"Two Stars. That's a nice name," said Marrec, as they continued to move toward the city.

"I believe it is named for the stars of the east and west that 'meet' in the heavens overhead. A good omen for trade, they say."

Marrec nodded, and they headed into town. The influx of those entering Two Stars was checked by toll collectors. Apparently their lack of a trade wagon made the group exempt from tax, and they were waved through.

"Let's go see your friend straightaway," said Marrec. "We can find an inn later."

Elowen nodded and started down the Golden Way.

It was bustling with carts, temporary and permanent storefronts, and the conversation of what seemed like thousands of people buying and selling all manner of things. The assortment of people was no less strange. Marrec guessed that he saw at least thirty different races, including a few gnolls, giants, and ores in fine cloth, which was a racial mixture he rarely if ever encountered in the west.

The amount of space given over to trade was really quite impressive. The larger side avenues were lined with tents of jugglers, puppeteers, dancing girls, hammer-throwers, fire-swallowers, and hedge wizards of every stripe. But along the main trade road was where the real merchandise could be

found. There were tables, stalls, and the cleverly fashioned unfolding wagons of merchants who'd lugged their goods from all corners of Faeriin. Cattle, food, timber, iron, oysters, wool, gem-stones, parchment and inks, glass, weaponry, charms of real power, and a host of additional items too many to take note of were bought and sold. The constant scream of conversation in dozens of languages, but mostly variously accented Common, was almost oppressive.

The crowds made their walk a slow one, as they did their best to ignore the cries and promises of the merchants on either side. Finally, Elowen found a side-street that was apparently not part of the trade road, for only a few people walked along the muddy-track. The buildings on either side seemed more given to warehousing than retailing.

Gunggari breathed a slight sigh of relief. Marrec knew the Oslander hated crowds. On the other hand, Ash seemed oblivious as she happily rode on the back of her pony. Marrec had been a little apprehensive that the child would react poorly to such a press of strangers.

Before too long they reached a tenement district. Children played in the narrow streets, knocking a wooden ball back and forth with a stout club. Elowen got her bearings, then made her way down a tight alley, which opened into an unkempt grassy courtyard that hid behind the backs of four buildings.

The top of a dome-shaped structure protruded from the ground at courtyard's center, rising no more than waist-high. Small holes pocked the surface of the dome, each punching a shaft down into darkness. Near the dome, broad stone stairs plunged down nine steep steps to a door. Marrec realized that the door probably allowed access to the interior of the buried structure. He surmised it was the home or lab of Elowen's friend, Ususi.

Marrec lifted Ash off Henri's back.

"Wait here, why don't you?" he muttered to Henri as he hobbled the pony.

Elowen led the way down the steps to the door. She put her hand to the knocker, striking three times, paused, then two more, a final pause, then a single loud rap. She glanced back and said, "That's to let Ususi know it's me."

"Nice," Marrec commented with the hint of a grin.

After a wait of just under half minute, a woman appeared at the door. She almost smiled when she saw the elf hunter. "Elowen. I wondered what had become of you." She glanced at Marrec, Gunggari, and Ash. What might have been a smile froze into a less welcoming expression. "And I see you've brought friends." The woman had a noticeable accent, but one Marrec couldn't place.

More striking than her accent was the woman's skin, which was a pale, stony color, complete with what almost seemed to be mineral veins running through it. Her hair and eyes were coal black, though the hint of her initial smile had been almost inviting. She wore a greatcoat inlaid with arcane symbols. A surprisingly large book was attached to her belt on her left side—Marrec had seen other wizards carry tomes of penned spells in a similar manner, and on her right, a small wand pouch dyed bright yellow.

Inside, the domed ceiling proved to be pockmarked with skylights—those were the holes they'd seen in the dome from the surface. The light wasn't allowed down into the chamber unimpeded. A host of strange objects, dangled from the curved ceiling, all at slightly different heights. Various lamps, roots of assorted bulbous shape, sheaves of aromatic grasses, stuffed animals (mostly birds), and other less identifiable pieces were on display. By far the most prominent hanging items were minerals and crystals of every sort.

On the floor level, squat bookshelves overflowed with tomes on all sides, while a great desk in the very center of the chamber contained piles of books, scrolls, and sheaves of unbound paper. Ususi was obviously very scholarly, if an avid collector of strange hangings.

"Come in. I will make tea, as you showed me, Elowen." Ususi retreated, sighing, and began to finger through various herbs hanging above their heads.

"You taught her to make tea?" Marrec quietly asked Elowen as they pulled chairs from one wall. Marrec picked up Ash and put her on one knee.

"Yes."

He'd hoped Elowen might elaborate. He wondered about Ususi's background. The woman's skin-tone indicated a place of origin even farther away than Gunggari, possibly.

"Now then," continued Ususi, as she found a mortar and pestle from a rear shelf, apparently to grind the leaves she had selected, "Please tell me the purpose of such a large gathering in my dwelling. Who is the child?"

Ash sat staring up at the throng of suspended items. Her expression remained unchanged as she made a single comment. "Ash."

"She does that," explained Marrec. "That's all she does. I mean, that's all she ever says." Unaccountably, he felt a bit tongue-tied talking to Ususi. Must be those night black eyes. Her eyes were dark, like twin wells with un-plumbed depths. Ususi raised an eyebrow as if to ask, 'and so?'

When the cleric didn't respond immediately, Elowen said, "She's the reason we're here, Ususi. At least, she's part of the reason. I'm afraid we are also here because of the Mucklestones."

At that, Ususi paused as she was about to pour the crushed leaves into seeping spoons. She looked concerned, but waited for Elowen to continue.

Elowen obliged, "Corruption is abroad. I've been tracking a group of blighted volodnis for over a month, south and east out of the Forest of Lethyr. We have determined that the volodnis were searching for this girl, Ash." The elf pointed to the child.

"Blighted volodnis?" wondered Ususi.

"I call them rot fiends," offered Marrec helpfully.

"Yes—blighted in a way that I do not fully understand," Elowen continued. The elf bit her lip as if keeping something back. "In any event, I knew you would want to know, because they emerged from the Mucklestones."

"By the Hidden Delve," exclaimed Ususi. "I knew it. I've been trying to access the portal stones for tendays, unsuccessfully." Before Marrec could ask what she meant, Ususi continued, "It's all interference, on every theurgic channel I am able to probe. Nor could I contact Briartan, the keeper of the stones. One other name keeps popping up, though, through the interference: Gameliel. That name means nothing to me, but..."

The hunter balled her fists.

Marrec asked, "Who is Gameliel?"

Elowen took a breath, said, "Gameliel is a blightlord, a being of terrible, corrupt power." Her eyes grew flinty. "If a blightlord is in the Forest of Lethyr, he must be rooted out. The corruption of the volodnis I followed must have been his doing. His doing, or his masters'."

Marrec turned the words over in his mind, looking for a connection with Lurue or Ash. He came up blank. He said "I'm as much in the dark as ever. Why is this Gameliel seeking Ash?" The problem, he decided, was that he still couldn't come up with a connection even between Ash and Lurue. Until he figured out that bond, he would likely continue to be at sea.

Ususi mused, "Why indeed? More information is required. Elowen, tell us more about this blightlord, and this master of which you speak. If we bring all the facts to the surface, perhaps connections can be made."

"Gameliel is but one of three currently active blight-lords. Each is powerful in his or her own right, but all serve a still greater master. I've been afraid Gameliel was active beyond the Rawlinswood, but I had no proof until now. The other two blightlords are called Anammelech and Damanda. The blightlords all serve a single master: the Rotting Man, also

called the Talontyr."

Ash, silent for so long, drew in her breath, as if in response to the last name.

All eyes found the child.

Ash was gazing at the hanging items, apparently without a care in the world, or cognizance of anything other than hanging roots, grasses, and bulbs.

When it was apparent that no further response was forthcoming from Ash, Elowen continued, "The Rotting Man is more aspect than mortal, but he is an aspect of decay. He is one of the Circle of Lethe's most potent and long standing enemies. If the Rotting Man's servant, Gameliel, is abroad in Lethyr, I must find and stop him. Even if I should succeed in that task, I must report back to the Nentyarch himself, who must be warned of the Rotting Man's newest embassy. He already holds most of Rawlinswood—he can't be allowed to infect the Forest of Lethyr."

"What are these Mucklestones? Why would Gameliel desire their control?" interjected Gunggari.

"They are ancient and potent," responded Ususi. "Though not all their powers are understood by any one person, save possibly for Briartan, one thing is certain: they serve as magical portals, allowing access

to and from distant places across, and under, Faerun." By the significant tone in her voice, Marrec wondered if the strange woman knew more than she was saying concerning the Mucklestones, but he didn't press the woman.

"Gameliel would want them for the same reason anyone might—in order to quickly transport himself, or his forces, without the need to physically travel the distance in between," said Elowen.

All were quiet for a time, considering.

Ususi poured hot tea into dainty blue stone cups and offered them to each traveler, except for Ash.

Marrec took a sip. Interesting. Something like a cross between citrus and cinnamon. He felt some of his travel-

induced weariness melt from him.

"Thank you," said Gunggari, also enjoying his tea.

Elowen merely sipped and smiled, evidently familiar with the revitalizing effects of Ususi's brew. For the moment, she was content watching the steam from her cup rise in simple loops and ribbons.

Ususi observed, "What about this child? I don't understand her role—why is she here? And the rest of you?" She pointed to Marrec and Gunggari. The woman seemed impatient, as if lack of understanding was a position unfamiliar to her.

Marrec's stomach sank. He realized then that Ususi knew nothing of Ash.

Marrec sighed, "None of us understand her role. My friend Gunggari and I are here because of her, and her apparent connection to these Mucklestones. All I know is that she is somehow important to my goddess Lurue."

Marrec launched into the story, telling Ususi about the goddess' growing silence over recent years, and the signs that finally led him to Ash, supposedly as an answer to these troubles.

When Marrec finished, Ususi frowned, sipped her tea, and offered no immediate response.

"Well?" asked Marrec, a little impatient in his own right.

"Your goddess is unfamiliar to me... she has not been one of my areas of study, but," Ususi raised her hands, forestalling Marrec's frustrated sigh, "I do have a strong feeling about this. Unless my eldritch intuition is astray, Briartan of the Mucklestones can provide you some answers to your questions."

Elowen nodded, saying, "There is little knowledge that Briartan does not gather to himself."

The unicorn warrior settled back, looking again at Ash. He had hoped to return Ash to her father after the Two Stars trip, but that was not to be, at least not immediately. The cleric would have to take the only other option available. He'd have to travel to the Mucklestones and confront

mysterious Gameliel and demand an answer.

Marrec declared, "Then I'm going to the Mucklestones. If Briartan can't aid me, perhaps Gameliel can answer my questions." Gunggari nodded.

Elowen added, "You can question him, but do it quickly. I am sworn to destroy Gameliel. Unless you object, I'd like to continue accompanying you."

"I would welcome your company and sword arm," responded Marrec.

"The Mucklestones are my specialty," interrupted Ususi. "I will come, too. I must learn why the portal stones are blocked."

"It won't be safe," said Marrec. Despite her exotic beauty, Marrec was unsure if adding this acerbic woman to their group was a good choice.

"I possess a power of my own, which Gameliel may learn, to his misfortune."

Marrec nodded his acquiescence, sighing. He couldn't say no to the potential aid of a wizard. He wondered if perhaps her presence was actually fortuitous, something Lurue had foreseen? Perhaps he would find his answer in the Forest of Lethyr.

Day kindled, and the travelers were already up and out of Two Stars, eager for an early start. Morning peeked over the shoulders of the darkened countryside. Before them, the land was quiet and in the pre-dawn light formless and gray, but even as they watched, night's fingers pulled back and colors began to bleed back into the world: the lighter greens of the fields, the darker-hued forests far off, the blue gradations of the sky with a fleecing of white clouds, and the coffee-brown of the road that stretched ahead.

"We can follow the Cold Road for a few miles," said Elowen.

"After that, I know of a trail we can take that'll shave days off our trip. Eventually, we'll intersect the northeastern end of the Lethyr Forest. I expect six or seven days to travel so many miles, even with the mounts."

She looked back, seeing Marrec and Ususi each astride a horse and Ash on her pony, Henri. Gunggari brought up the rear. Like her, the Oslander preferred traveling on his own two feet. Despite that preference, she knew Marrec was right in procuring mounts for everyone. Horseback was the only way to travel the distance in any reasonable amount of time, especially with Ususi along. While Ususi controlled potent magic, she apparently didn't like to squander them on anything as mundane as transportation. The wizard seemed a bit put out because her magical portal to the Mucklestones was blocked. Likely Ususi had been considering a trip to investigate even before Marrec made an appearance with Ash, Gunggari, and herself in tow. For Ususi, Marrec's appearance must seem a happy coincidence.

The Cold Road was in good repair, at least so close to Two Stars. The road ran straight and wide through low grasslands, but further on she could see the road passed through deep groves of conifer. Farms and small communities were visible in the distance, as the sun continued to ascend along its daily track. Elowen had not taken the trail she intended for their group in thirteen years, but her memory was certain. Past the next long rise, she would break left off the road.

Behind her, she could hear Marrec quizzing Ususi. She smiled. Ususi wasn't particularly forthcoming about her origins. Elowen had known the woman for several years, and only in the last few had she discovered the secret Ususi wanted kept quiet. After all, most surface dwellers reacted poorly when they learned that they were in the presence of someone hailing from the Underdark.

Obviously Ususi wasn't drow or some even worse abomination birthed in the world below the sun. In fact, she presumed Ususi was more closely related to Marrec than herself, with her elven blood. Ususi claimed to be a member of a human sub-race thought extinct on the surface, but who

instead had sealed themselves into an hidden enclave in the deepest portion of the Underdark that they could penetrate. Apparently a race of wizards, the refugees had sealed all knowledge of their presence behind impenetrable walls of force and illusion. Only recently, after thousands of years, Ususi claimed, had those walls begun to fail. Ususi was one of the first of her race in generations to leave the enclave. Ususi claimed to be a descendent of the Imaskar empire.

The name meant nothing to Elowen.

Elowen was merely glad Ususi had finally developed enough trust in their friendship to reveal so much about her past. The Imaskari still feared whatever drove her ancestors into hiding, but Elowen doubted that the threat still existed, whatever it was; Ususi would not name it.

Marrec had a long road to travel if he thought he was going to get any information out of the wizard on such short notice, mused Elowen. He'd have to put in his time, as Elowen had. Soon enough, the man realized the same thing and allowed Ususi to move ahead of his own mount. Marrec's eyes began to focus on places other than the road ahead. Worrying about his goddess Lurue, she guessed.

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When young Marrec fled his adoptive village into the wild, he had no clear destination. At first, getting away was his only concern. He reviled himself, still hurting from the insults and jeers heaped on him as he fled. Fear drove the villagers to act out. Confused and uncomprehending of what his mere gaze had accomplished, Marrec believed those taunts.

Though he sought solace in the wilderness, he fled without preparation. He brought only a spear, clutched to him with determination, and with some thought of using it hunt. That first night, rain poured from a dank sky. Cold to the bone and wet, the best shelter Marrec could find was beneath a stout tree branch.

Things might have gone the worse for him then, but as fate or chance had it, Thanial Selwander found him.

Thanial was known to Marrec and others of his village as the secretive "Man in the Wood." He appeared in town once every few years, and Marrec had only seen the man a few times and at a distance. His brother Emmon had many stories to tell of the Man in the Wood, usually involving Thanial hunting and slaying some strange new forest beast. Surprisingly, Thanial seemed to recognize him, saying, "Marrec. So you've decided to leave the village, eh? Things out here can be a little difficult for a novice woodsman. Why don't you stick with me, and I'll show what you need to know."

Marrec was astounded at Thanial's casual greeting, but he was happy to accept aid. His hunger was nearly as great as the chill in his extremities, and moreover, kindness seemed an unlooked for gift. He decided to put off telling Thanial about his devil-born ability for a while.

Thanial bade Marrec to live with him in his home in a wooded and sheltered valley between two sharp peaks. The woodman's home was a well-constructed log house, filled with rough amenities, including a great stone fireplace and a dry, flagged floor. A stream flowed down from one peak and on through the valley, its path not more than a few feet from the house. It offered clear water for drinking, cooking, and baking, and fish could be caught from it, great mountain trout usually, but sometimes salmon if the season was right.

The first night, Marrec slept on the flagged stones on a mattress of furs, staring into the warming fire. Thanial had a great black wolf called Shira who seemed a companion than pet. Shira lay near Marrec that night, her great muzzle protruding out like a ship's prow, sniffing Marrec suspiciously. Thanial stepped into the next room to prepare a meal, but Marrec fell fast asleep, and woke with the sun and birdsong the next day.

Thanial walked in with the sun and said, "Awake at

last, eh? Good. It's time I gave you some real training, something to go on if you ever find yourself lost in the woods again. You may be good with that spear, but it won't help your hunger if you can't track a deer or bring down a bird."

So Marrec stayed with Thanial. Somehow, Thanial seemed to know him and know things about him. That mystified Marrec, but since Thanial continued on in that manner, Marrec accepted it.

Six months passed. Every day, Thanial roused him from sleep just as morning's pink light stole into the forest. There was too much to do to sleep any later. Thanial shared with Marrec a world of wonder, opportunity, and knowledge. He trained Marrec to see the web of connections that comprised nature. From the dew to the spider webs it collected upon, to the birds that preyed on the spiders, to the quickest cougars that brought down those birds, and finally to life's end, which claimed all creatures weak and strong, Marrec began to develop a deep understanding of the links between all living things.

Thanial was a self-proclaimed wild ranger but also a devout adherent of she who Thanial called the Queen of the Forest. So Thanial was schooled in forest craft and also in the mysteries of Thanial's Queen, called Lurue. According to Thanial, knowledge of the first was also knowledge of the second.

Marrec proved an apt pupil. The more he learned, the more he realized that the spirit of Lurue was something he could love and cherish. Not only was she the goddess of the animals but also a free spirit of adventure and happiness. She was a guide for those who wished for no home but the wild. At that time, he decided that he would devote himself to the goddess, and serve her needs in the world.

One morning Thanial woke him with a strangely serious air.

"What is it?" Marrec asked.

"It's time I showed you something. I wasn't going to, but I've

changed my mind. I think you're old enough." Thaniel had a leather satchel in his hands, worn and obviously very old.

It wouldn't be out of character for Thaniel to lure Marrec into a false sense of alarm, only to laugh uproariously when the true situation, usually somehow comedic, became apparent. Marrec ruefully shook his head and smiled. "All right, lay it on me Thaniel."

Thaniel laid the satchel down across the great table he and Marrec had built from lengths of pine. As serious as a stone, he undid the old leather ties then carefully removed from it an object: A glazed stone bulb the size of a fist from which a short stone handle stretched. Tassels with small charms and beads were tied to the handle. As Thaniel removed from the object from the satchel, it rattled. It was a child's rattle.

Marrec's face flushed, and his eyes grew wide. He knew that rattle. It was his, from his earliest childhood.

"Where...?"

"You had it clutched in your hand when I found you," explained Thaniel gently. "It was I who found you, a child in the forest, sixteen years ago almost. It was I who asked the cobbler to take you in to make a home for the orphan I found lying all alone in the woods."

"You found me?" Marrec didn't know where to start. "But where? Why? I don't understand."

"Your adoptive father thought it best to indicate that it had been he who found you, not I. That's all."

Marrec swallowed, but he could see that Thaniel had more to say. "What else?"

"When I found you... you were not exactly as you appear now. Oh, from a distance you seemed a human child of nearly two years, crying, red faced, clutching your rattle, but when I bent to retrieve you from the forest floor, I saw something I didn't want to believe. I thought at first it was a parasite, but I was wrong. Curling up through your black hair were tiny... serpents. They were rooted, as if hair, in your head."

Marrec heard a rushing noise in his ears. He stared at Thanial, uncomprehending.

Thanial continued, "I took my blade and severed them. I didn't think twice. I cut them out by their roots. They didn't grow back. You didn't seem to miss them. In fact, you acted like any toddler would act, though at first I feared otherwise; I feared some monstrous influence. But no, at least one of your parents was obviously human. You were perfectly harmless. I kept you for a time, but I knew I couldn't raise you right. I gave you up to the village. I gave you up so you could have a real family."

Still Marrec couldn't utter a word. As he did unconsciously every day of his life, he raised a hand to his brow and with his fingers probed above his hairline for the hidden scars.

The edge of the main forest was dark and close. Clouds tumbled across the sky, gray and vast, and from their bellies they unleashed yet another downpour.

Forest leaves caught the falling rain, deflecting it from its original goal of the moist earth, but only temporarily. Tiny trickles of water collected and ran down the columns of conifer, pine, and the occasional grove of silver aspen, green with spring growth. The Forest of Lethyr sheltered trees of many sorts within its confines, but all were glad, in their own way, to feel the rain on their boughs.

Five riders, one no more than a child, entered the eaves of the forest, eager to gain some protection from the sudden spring rain. The group hailed from Two Stars, having crossed the intervening distance in just a little more than a tenday.

The elven woman in the lead raised a hand and called for a pause. She said, "We've entered Lethyr." She slipped easily from her saddle to stand on the rain-soaked ground.

"Elowen, how far now to the Mucklestones?" asked the dark haired woman in wizardly attire. "Though I've journeyed there several times, this will be the first time I've done so by taking every jarring step in between." The dark haired woman sighed, rubbing the small of her back.

Marrec swung down from his horse. He studied the forest floor. He was acquainted with many forests in the west, but he was unfamiliar with that one.

He asked Elowen, "Anything we should watch out for, aside from rotting volodnis?"

Elowen said, "Certainly. This is a wild forest, and dangerous creatures roam below its dark canopy. Of course, most are goodly creatures that bear us no ill will. If we're lucky, we might meet a treant. I know a few in this part of Lethyr."

"Treants?" asked Gunggari. Gunggari was clothed more in tattoos than cloth, and the chill rain threatened to raise goosebumps on his skin. He took advantage of the pause to dismount.

"Great stewards of the forest. Nentyar hunters like myself sometimes work hand in hand with these great treeish creatures to protect the woods from threat."

"I hope their 'treeishness' doesn't make them susceptible to the same sort of controlling rot as the volodnis we've faced," commented Marrec.

He walked over to Ash on her pony, checking her saddle. The horse and child had weathered the trip amazingly well, without soreness, hurt, or abraded skin. He suspected the girl's healing ability had been at work. Reminded of that, he mentally sought out his own remaining powers as a tongue seeks the space formerly occupied by a recently pulled tooth. His powers had diminished, and without

contact with Lurue, he couldn't replace the powers he used up. During their trip across the plain, his feeling of connection with Lurue had grown more tenuous than ever. He prayed for the thousandth time that he was on the right path, and that the girl held the answer to Lurue's silence.

Marrec towed the girl's hair dry with the hem of his cloak. The child briefly fixed him with her dull gaze. "Ash," she commented.

Elowen walked back to join him, as did Gunggari. Ususi on her horse was already close. They had an impromptu

conference beneath the weepy canopy.

The elf hunter said, "I've brought us in just to the south of a human settlement on the forest edge. I think we're far enough from their loggers," she sniffed. "Likewise, all the wood elves who inhabit Lethyr are clustered further to the west and south of here, so we'll likely avoid having to explain our presence to them. Really, it's a straight shot through the treess"

"How far?" repeated Ususi, a somewhat testy tone to her voice.

"With a clear route and no trouble, it'd be no more than a day's travel, but of course wending through the trees will slow us. I estimate we'll reach the Mucklestones tomorrow evening."

Ususi shook her head and said, "Not soon enough for me. Even one more-night of 'camping' is more than I can handle."

Gunggari grinned at the mage's words but said nothing. Marrec forbade comment, too, realizing that for the city woman, stone-like skin or not, their trip must have been hard to endure.

"What?" Gunggari snapped, stepping back and looking intently up into the leafy foliage ahead and above them. The Oslander had pulled out his dizheri just as quickly.

The others all reacted with alarm, peering ahead and grabbing up their weapons.

"What's going on?" demanded Ususi.

Marrec strained his eyes but saw nothing unusual amidst the dripping leaves. It was midmorning, but the light, already filtered by lowering clouds, was further reduced under the trees.

"Gunny, what is it? I don't see anything."

"It's gone now, Marrec," responded the tattooed warrior, still looking forward intently, "but something was watching us—some sort of ape."

"There are no apes in Lethyr," pronounced Elowen.

"It wasn't exactly an ape," continued Gunggari. "At first I thought a man's face was staring at me, but then I saw that gray-white hair covered its twisted limbs, and it had more than just two eyes—many more than I could count in the heartbeat it appeared to me."

Elowen frowned.

"Uthraki?" she murmured, almost under her breath.

"What's an uthraki?" wondered Marrec.

"A nasty beast native to Rashemen. I have never heard of one so far west. They are confined to Rashemen and further east—or they were."

"Anything we should know about these uthraki?" asked Marrec.

"Yes. They can assume forms other than their own."

Gunggari narrowed his eyes, and gripped his war club all the tighter.

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All variety of trees were contained within Lethyr, Marrec realized: maples, firs, aspens, pines, holly, oaks, tulip-trees, crabapples, and many more that the cleric could not name, despite his familiarity with forests to the west. Of wildlife, they heard and saw many birds, a fox chasing a rabbit, more squirrels than could be numbered, a sleepy owl, and once, far off, the yip of a wolf.

A full day of travel under the dark boughs saw light give way to nearly complete twilight. The white trunks of the aspen grove through which they currently wended glowed all the paler for the growing dimness of the surrounding pines. The green leaves glimmered and shook in a sudden breeze of colder air. Night was coming on, and the sounds of the forest began to change, as some creatures sought their lairs, and others, stretching, began their nightly rounds. At the urging of the wind, the rustling forest leaves sounded their nightly chorus.

Elowen walked at the head of the group, leading her mount. The elf finally paused and smiled, saying, "Ah ha. I knew

there was a waycache around here. Come on, follow me."

The elf hunter dropped the reins of her horse, moved along the side of a massive boulder that was butted up against a cliff, then dipped around behind it out of sight.

Marrec shrugged and dismounted. Before hobbling his own horse for the night, he helped down Ususi. Ususi plucked Ash from her pony then moved to follow Elowen, leaving Marrec with the job of grooming, feeding, and hobbling the horses.

"They know the silent art of delegation," noted Gunggari, as the Oslander helped Marrec take care of all their mounts' needs.

Marrec grinned but added, "You have to admit, there is something about the mage..."

"My people ask if beauty at a steep price is still beauty, Marrec."

The unicorn warrior laughed, saying, "Don't worry, Gunny. I've got enough on my plate with just the two women in my life, Lurue and Ash. I don't want to add a third to the mix."

Despite his pronouncement, he knew himself well enough to realize the damage had already been done. He found Ususi exotic. Damn.

"What about you, though?" Marrec quizzed his friend. "I notice you have been treating Elowen to far more stories of your land' than I've heard from your mouth in a year. Something tells me you're showing off."

Gunggari cocked his head without responding and finished grooming Henri.

When the two men finished, they passed through the cleft formed by boulder and cliff and found a small hollow cunningly cut into the cliff wall. The space was far larger than Marrec would have supposed from the outside. He guessed he might be able to get the mounts into the space, though that might be pushing it. Elowen had hung her lamp on an overhanging branch, washing everything in dim radiance.

Several cavities, like inset shelves, were cut into the rock of the surrounding boulders. Elowen went through these shelves as Marrec watched, pulling out small leaf wrapped packets. Ususi sat on a small moss-lined boulder, her nose in one of the books she had brought. Ash sat nearby, looking nowhere in particular. On the far side of the waycache, water from a spring spilled into a carved basin, then drained again from one side into a small ravine that slipped back under the earth. Marrec used and even maintained similar caches for travelers in the woods of Cormanthor and even in the High Forest, but he had to admit that the hidden spring was a nice touch.

"I don't understand," said Elowen, still going through the contents of the shelves. "This waycache hasn't been restocked in at least a year by the looks of these." She gestured to the few leaf-wrapped parcels she had drawn out. The leaves were dried and brown, which Marrec knew spoke volumes about the freshness of whatever was contained within.

Ash stood without prodding, which was unusual, walked over and nudged one of the wrappers. The girl's nose wrinkled, as if in disgust.

"What is it?" said Marrec, rushing up to his charge.

Losing interest, Ash lapsed back into her normal uncaring stare.

"She must sense the spoilage," responded Elowen. "We're stuck with our own rations for a few more nights, it seems. I can't understand why this cache hasn't been restocked. Briartan never allows this portion of the wood to go untended."

Gunggari asked, "How close are we to the Mucklestones from here?"

"Just a few miles," answered Elowen. "I thought this would be a good place to rest up before plunging ahead. I want us to be rested when we meet the great druid."

Ususi looked up. She said, "Briartan has the Mucklestones in

his charge. The Mucklestones are blocked. I doubt Briartan would have allowed that if he could have stopped it. Since he couldn't stop it, he's probably..."

Elowen stared at her friend with dawning alarm in her eyes, and Ususi didn't finish her thread of logic. Marrec was gratified to see that Ususi had empathy enough to spare her friend's feelings. It gave him hope.

The group bedded down for the night after establishing a watch schedule. Marrec went to his rest, thankful to have avoided first watch, but sleep was too brief. He woke to the relentless black of middle-night at Gunggari's prodding, whose turn it was to cast off into dreamland. He held back an irritated comment with a real show of will. Where lack of sleep was involved, the cleric knew he was sometimes bitter. Marrec was on the middle-watch, when by rights all earthly creatures should be snug in their dens—except for the worst sort of creature, which, after all, was why he was awake to guard against them. His eyes roamed the wayeache, picking out each of his fellow travelers wrapped snugly in their blankets. They'd had a small fire earlier, but Gunggari had let it die down to mere embers. Marrec lit the lamp. Elowen had found a store of lamp oil in one of the storage shelves, more than enough to last through several days of continuous burning should they need it.

The sound of a child crying dimly reached his ears. He stiffened, his eyes immediately shifting to Ash, but the girl slept soundly, her eyes and mouth closed. He could still hear the crying, unmistakably that of small child. Was it his curse to find orphans around every corner? Better check it out, he chided himself.

Before he exited, he shook the tattooed warrior, "Gunny, you awake?"

The Oslander opened one eye and used it to fix him with a baleful stare.

Marrec whispered, "I'm going out to check something. I heard some kid crying out in the woods, just outside the

waycache. Stay alert, I'll be back in a minute if it's nothing." Gunggari craned his head, listening, but the crying had stopped.

Marrec held the lamp up in one hand, held his spear Justlance in the other, and exited the cozy waycache into the darkness of the forest.

Pausing some feet beyond the large boulder, he scanned to the extent he was able, listening with all his attention. He heard a quiet sob off to the right.

He moved toward the sound, cautious and ready for a trap. What he found was an elven boy of not more than thirteen years, cringing from Marrec's lamplight, hiding behind a great tree. He was dirty and his clothing was ripped. The boy's eyes were wide with fear.

"What in Lurue's great wilderness are you doing here?" asked Marrec.

The boy looked at him, then said something in a language Marrec didn't know. Elvish, but strangely accented.

Looking around, the cleric couldn't find any other evidence to explain how an elven boy could be hiding and crying outside the waycache.

"All right, let's get you back to the others. Elowen will know where you come from, I wager."

Sheathing his spear, he then held out a hand for the boy to take. "Come on, I'm not going to hurt you."

The boy took Marrec's hand and allowed himself to be led into the waycache.

The waifs eyes were wide as he took in the group, most still sleeping, except for Gunggari and Elowen. Gunggari must have woken Elowen while Marrec was outside the hollow, he thought. Good, then he didn't have to be the one...

"What are you doing?" yelled Elowen at Marrec.

As she yelled, she struggled for her weapon, which was snagged in her sleeping furs.

Taken off guard, Marrec stared dumbly. That's when the elven boy gave voice to a horrible roar and leaped through

the air toward Ash.

In a timeless instant, Marrec saw the boy bloat and elongate, his boy-shape melting away to reveal a gray-white hairy apelike thing. Its twisted limbs scrabbled through the air as they unfolded, and a dozen completely black eyes set all the way around its head glared in all directions.

Gunggari, closer to Ash than anyone else, managed to throw himself into the path of the creature, but the creature that smashed into the Oslander was at least four times the mass of a man. It bowled Gunggari over, sending man and dizheri flying.

Gunggari had offered enough distraction for Marrec to react, but he was too far from the beast. Marrec had sheathed his spear, and his goddess-granted spells seemed as distant as ever. He felt an unwelcome heat behind his eyes, as if in answer to his frustration.

Elowen, bringing up her sword, hissed, "An uthraki!"

The uthraki, its path clear, focused its attention on the just-waking Ash. Its eight foot height towered over the child. Marrec's eyes began to burn. He felt the ache form a searing circuit from the back of his head to his eyes, and...

As if reaching up to pluck a fruit from a tree, Ash touched the advancing creature. A dim flash ... and where once stood the uthraki, there was nothing, save perhaps motes of dust glittering in Marrec's lamplight.

Silence descended on the hollow, as all eyes fell on little Ash. The girl seemed oblivious to the attention. She settled back into her furs.

Marrec released his pent-up breath, and with it the pain in his head dispersed, just as quickly. His oath remained intact. He gave silent thanks to Lurue, but the girl... what powers did she yet hide? No wonder she was so important to the goddess.

"She has more than just the hands of a healer," commented Gunggari, saying aloud what all must were thinking.

Ususi, who had woken late but in time to note Ash's

spectacular destruction of the threatening beast, said nothing, but she watched the young girl closely.

Elowen said, "It is odd that the uthraki was so intent on Ash. Usually, they attack those they've duped, after they've led their intended victim into a secluded spot."

Marrec realized that Elowen meant that it should have been Marrec who was attacked, while he was outside the hollow. Perhaps she was even rebuking him for falling victim to such a dupe. He felt the urge to defend his choice to investigate the sound of a crying child—but instead, he quietly accepted the blame.

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The figure stepped forward, entering the stone circle while darkness yet reigned. One of his spies had perished. The spell that linked him to the shapechanger was severed. He cared not for the welfare of the uthraki—it was little more than a beast. It had served its purpose merely in giving warning through its death. Someone approached.

Gameliel woke his thralls. There were preparations to make, rot to culture, and spells to unsheathe. He wouldn't allow the newest, most important outpost of the Rotting Man's empire to fall back into the idle hands of idiot druids. He glanced at the dark shape that still hung impaled on one of the great stones, smirking.

The blightlord felt the weight of the Keystone's cord around his neck. With it, Gameliel possessed the power of the Mucklestones. There was no place the Rotting Man and his most powerful servants could not penetrate at whim.

First, he had to prepare the ambush.

CHAPTER 9

When darkness failed, they broke camp.

Marrec thought the woods were too quiet. In forests to the west, he would have been able to identify the calls of over a dozen species of birds in as many seconds. Instead one crow cawed in the distance as they set out that morning, and for the next several hours he heard nothing more.

"Is the forest usually so..." began Marrec.

"Silent?" finished Elowen. "No." She frowned. "Even yesterday, if you recall, all seemed well. Something's changed."

"It's Gameliel," spoke Ususi from behind them. She continued, "His influence may extend beyond the Mucklestones, and we are close to the circle. I begin to feel the stone shapes in my mind."

"If we are close, we need to be cautious," advised Gunggari, who rode abreast of Marrec and Elowen.

"Agreed," nodded the elf hunter. She added in a tentative tone, "I worry about Briartan."

Marrec said nothing. If Briartan were responsible for the Mucklestones, he doubted the man had come to any good with Gameliel's arrival, or worse, Briartan had been co-opted. He'd seen similar things in the past. They'd find out what was really going on in just a few miles.

He said, "We need a plan, of course."

Gunggari smiled and waited.

"First, let's hear more about this Gameliel," said Marrec.

"What should we be prepared for? What does it mean when you say he is a blightlord?"

"The blightlords serve the goddess called Talona," said Elowen. "They are corrupt priests who revel in rot and decay. Their plagues and blights have transformed the western reaches of the Rawlinswood into a foul green hell of diseased monsters and deadly poisons. Gameliel is but one of three, that we know of. Always they seek to infect the healthy forests and lands nearby with the same sickness that is rapidly destroying the ancient Rawlinswood. Though they ultimately serve Talona, their direct master is the Rotting Man, the one who stands highest in Talona's putrid grace."

"What're the other two called again?" wondered Marrec

"Anammelech and Damanda."

All were quiet for a moment, absorbing Elowen's words.

Marrec finally said, "Gunggari should sneak ahead and scout

when we get a little closer, then report back. He's good at that sort of thing."

"I'm going with him," stated Elowen. "I also know a thing or two about forest craft."

"Great," said Marrec. "We'll proceed at a slower pace. Double back when you have the chance. Give a signal if you need help."

"What signal?" wondered Elowen.

"If I can not reach my dizheri, I will yell for help," said Gunggari.

Elowen smiled. She and Gunggari dismounted, then forged ahead, melting into the greenery.

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They moved through the forest. Like leaves on a breeze, from the shadow of one tree to the next, Elowen and Gunggari closed on their goal.

Elowen called upon her stealthcraft, gratified to see that Gunggari knew at least as much as she. To many of her race, surreptitious forest travel came naturally. Elowen liked to keep her techniques in the forefront of her mind. She felt that by doing so, she was all the better at evading detection. For instance, movement itself is a target indicator. The eye is drawn to movements, so a stationary target may be impossible to detect, and even a steadily but slowly moving target might go unnoticed. Quick, jerky movements are almost always seen, so her slow but silky movements from bole to trunk were deliberate. She didn't give herself away by talking to Gunggari. Of course, she always stowed her equipment in a way that eliminated chance rattling.

Both she and the Oslander were already dressed appropriately for such movement. Neither openly carried anything reflective. Both wore colors designed to blend into the foliage in an attempt to obscure their silhouettes. A body's outline, or even just the head and shoulders, are silhouettes that draw an intelligent eye; even if a watcher can't identify what it sees immediately, the eye is

unconsciously drawn, and recognition eventually percolates into consciousness. Camouflage helped.

The trees ahead of her were obviously not right. She held her right hand up and made a fist, a sign for Gunggari to pause. Taking a moment, she scanned the area, noticing the blighted trees and a gray, unhealthy looking fungus growing over trees, leaves—though there were few

enough of those—and the ground. Beyond those she could make out a clear circular space bordered by weathered stones. She was seeing the edge of the Mucklestones.

Normally, the ring of trees surrounding the stones reached their branches out above the hollow bowl, entirely protecting it from the sky's open gaze. But the surrounding trees, fungus-wounded and dying, had lost most of their leaves, and the sky was easily visible above.

Just as the nearby trees were host to the life-sapping fungus, the very stones that gave the place their name were scarred with innumerable patches of growth, staining them with gray slime and obscuring the nature runes etched into the stone.

There, too, was Briartan. Elowen gave out a gasp before she could rein in her reaction. Her old friend was staked to one of the Mucklestones, spread-eagle, an iron spike driven through the palms of both hands. His head lolled down on his chest, and he didn't move. His left leg was missing, amputated. Blood stains spattered his clothing.

"Briartan!" whispered Elowen, unable to stop herself.

Something else moved within the bowl. Many somethings, but from her current position, the recessed nature of the bowl hid what moved, or how many potential foes lurked within.

Defiant, Elowen moved. She motioned for Gunggari to accompany her but didn't wait to see what action the Oslander would take. All her attention was on Briartan. She needed to see if he was still alive, despite his awful state.

Defying her stealthcraft, she darted up to Briartan. The druid

was staked up on an exterior face of one of the great stones. She reached up and felt for a pulse on the man's neck. A slight staccato beat, but it was, oh, so faint.

"We've been spotted," hissed Gunggari.

She glanced into the bowl. Gunggari was right.

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Marrec didn't know what to do with Ash, he realized too late. He debated leaving her back with Ususi, but according to Elowen, the woman was a skilled mage, and they could use her talents against the Blightlord, if indeed Gameliel was found in the center of the Mucklestones. Besides, he doubted Ususi would hang back—she was out for Gameliel's blood.

Gunggari's dizheri blared forth, penetrating clearly even through the thick forest growth. It was a call for aid.

Marrec realized the time for worrying was over. He whipped Henri's lead around the bole of the nearest tree and tied it with a loose knot. He had tied Elowen and Gunggari's horses on the same bole when they had departed. Ash sat her mount without comment.

He fixed the girl with a look and said, "Ash, stay here. We'll be back. You'll be all right."

The girl looked at him, unconcerned. Now that he had seen her defend herself against the uthraki, some of the anxiety he felt about escorting such a small child into danger was reduced.

Ususi used the time Marrec was dealing with Ash to charge ahead on her horse, heading toward the dizheri's call. Marrec cursed and spurred his own horse in pursuit.

Marrec goaded his steed to the maximum pace it was willing to take through the forest, which was too fast for his own comfort, he realized only after the fact. Tree trunks and low branches whizzed by, and a jump over a fallen log almost sent him tumbling off the back of the horse. The retreating, snaking hem of Ususi's cloak led him on, elusively remaining just out of reach.

Then everything opened up, as he flashed past two standing stones, one on either side, and into a wide circle bounded by rune-etched obelisks. At the last, Ususi held back, allowing Marrec to charge into the bowl by himself. He cursed again when he saw what was waiting.

At least ten gangrenous rot fiends occupied the outskirts of the bowl, concentrated to Marrec's left; he saw they were engaging Gunggari and Elowen. His attention was consumed by the man who stood at the center of the ring at its deepest point. It was Gameliel. It had to be.

The blightlord wore dark gray plate armor, etched with runes that appeared to pulsate and overlap each other occasionally, and from which seeped an oily, black fluid. He wore reddish gauntlets and a helm constructed of the same blood-hued alloy. In one hand he seemed to clutch a halberd-shaped hole in the air leading into utter blackness. Marrec felt he could feel cold bleeding from it, even from where he heeled his mount to stand several yards away.

Gameliel the blightlord stood in a puddle of ooze that was constantly being replenished from the blightlord's armor. Small tendrils of ooze snaked up away from the shallow pool at the bowl's center, touching many of the flat stones ringing the space.

"You picked the wrong day to visit the Mucklestones, friend," came the blightlord's rasping voice.

"You picked..."

Interrupting Marrec's witty response came Ususi's strident yell, "You've contaminated the portal system! You've wrecked the stones!"

She had to shout over the clamor of fighting between the volodnis, Elowen, and Gunggari. Marrec could barely see either the elf hunter or the Oslander. Their fight continued outside the ring and was screened from the cleric's view by the press of rot fiends, but he could hear Gunggari's dizheri singing to itself as the tattooed soldier swung it against the swarming volodnis.

"On the contrary," rasped Gameliel. "I haven't wrecked them. I've re-routed the stones for my own use."

Marrec, in turn, interrupted Ususi, "Call your rot fiends off and yield, or we'll force you to succumb. If you yield willingly and answer my questions about the goddess Lurue..."

Ususi struck, interrupting his ultimatum. A rush of unintelligible words preceded her throwing motion. A bead of fire arced high over bowl then dropped toward the blightlord. Marrec sighed. He'd have to get his answers the hard way.

Gameliel glanced at the falling bead but was unruffled. Instead, he spewed a foul syllable. Even as Ususi's fiery bead fell toward him, the oily sludge in which he stood inflated, as if it was a mammoth bubble of swamp gas on the surface of stagnant water. In a mere second it enclosed Gameliel in a transparent dome. The blightlord stood within, gesticulating and chanting.

The bead of fire detonated directly over the blightlord's head. The rush of heat singed Marrec's eyebrows, but when the flash faded, Gameliel was unharmed. The bubble was gone, and there was less ooze at the blightlord's feet than before.

From the back of his horse, Marrec hurled Justlance at the blightlord. It sped unerringly at Gameliel, but a tendril of ooze rose up and flicked the spear away. Instead of the blightlord's chest, it buried itself in a rune-etched stone, its shaft quivering.

Gameliel finished incanting. A flash of dark green heralded the sudden appearance of a monster no more than arm's length from Ususi. The powerfully built creature stood taller than Ususi on her mount. She yelled in alarm and shrank back on her saddle. Marrec recognized the monster—a forest troll, and a big one at that.

Already Gameliel was chanting away on another spell. Marrec knew a troll so close would challenge Ususi's ability to defend herself, but the cleric judged that he had to deal

with the blightlord first, or they might face even more trolls. Time to use up another hoarded spell, Marrec decided. The slime shield had to be burned away.

He called on what grace was left to him, channeling a searing beam of divine light, which he hurled as a spear at Gameliel's heart.

Again the slime bubble rose up and absorbed the blast, or at least part of it. This time, a trickle of light played across the blightlord's form. Gameliel cried out then cursed as he lost the weave of his spell.

The volodnis continued their attack on Gunggari and Elowen across a quarter span of the Mucklestones bowl, not Marrec's concern right then.

What about... soot and coal!

His glance back revealed Ususi squirming in the troll's grasp. With both hands clamped upon the wizard, the troll was attempting to pull her into two pieces.

Justlance appeared once more in Marrec's hand, and in a single liquid movement he cast the spear directly into the troll's back.

The green behemoth screamed, dropping Ususi. The woman scuttled backward on all fours, bloodied but still alive. The troll whirled, searching for its attacker an instant before fixing its hungry gaze on Marrec. It charged, its powerful arms raised high, its claws promising a lethal rain. Marrec spurred his horse, tried to get it to sidestep the charging monster, but his mount reared in a sudden panic, throwing the cleric to the ground. The fall jolted the wind from him.

"Whose plan was this, anyway?" Marrec muttered as he attempted to regain his feet, only to be bowled over by the troll. Its claws sought crevices in his armor but were only partially successful. A thread of pain pulsed on the side of Marrec's face where one of the troll's claws scored.

Again, Justlance shimmered back to his hand, giving the troll a moment's pause. Armed again, his confidence ticked back up a notch. He used the spear's shaft to quickly lever himself to his feet. The sour, rotten smell of the troll's breath rolled over him, nearly a presence in and of itself, hardly less lethal than the monster.

Marrec groaned as he felt something touch him from behind through his armor. The blightlord, untended, had gotten another nasty hex off, and he was the target. Whatever it was, it seemed to be growing below his armor second by second. It itched as if a colony of ants were running across his back. He yelped in surprise, or if truth be told, alarm.

A crack of thunder rode the heels of a crazy line of electric light that zagged past Marrec and struck Gameliel a grazing shot. Ususi was on her feet again, but her aim was a little off.

The blightlord snarled with pain but dramatically clutched his empty fist, as if squeezing something. In response, pain blistered across Marrec's body. The pain issued from the spot he'd seconds before felt the itching. As if pain were sprouting roots across his body, the agony grew.

Marrec realized he had been infected with the blightlord's touch. Some sort of hyper-quick rot or disease, he presumed. He fumbled in his belt pouch and brought out a small vial filled with fizzing blue-white liquid. Though his directly granted spells were nearly spent, he was not without one or two additional resources. Uncorking the vial with his teeth, he gulped down its contents. The divine balm spread through him like cool water, quenching the pain and driving the infection from his body. He gasped out thanks to Lurue.

The troll took advantage of Marrec's distraction with another claw-tipped swing, forcing him back behind the point of his spear. He risked another glance at the blightlord. Gameliel spent another second clutching the air before realizing the action was futile. Marrec's brief infection was cleansed.

Gameliel said, "You seem resistant to the lesser rots. Let's see how you fare against the Corruption of..."

He broke off when he saw the pale green beam of light touch dead center upon his chest. The beam was projected by Ususi, still standing just outside the ring of the bowl.

"Is that...?" was Gameliel's last utterance.

The blightlord burst asunder. The pool of slime began to boil then wisped away like morning fog. The black halberd he had been clutching in one hand continued to stand of its own accord for a moment then slowly dissipated, like a hole in mud closing over, leaving nothing but empty air.

Residual power snapped and discharged from Ususi's pointing hand. In her other hand she held an unrolled page of vellum, penned sigils still fading from its surface. She had unleashed a spell penned by the hand of a mighty wizard. Marrec wondered if that hand was Ususi's?

The wizard winced, shaking her hand free of residual power,

and said, "You shouldn't have disturbed the Mucklestones, blightlord," then fell back against a stone.

Her effort must have been extreme—the spell on the parchment may have been beyond her normal ability to cast. Smoke rose from her garments. The scroll, its potency spent, fluttered to the ground, now completely blank vellum. Ususi managed to retain her feet with the help of the supporting obelisk.

"Lurue's blessing..." Marrec's claim of victory was cut off by the troll's vicious attack. Whatever power Gameliel had used to call the monster, it survived its master's death.

He deflected one of the creature's claw-tipped swings with Justlance, running a deep score along the troll's arm with his spear tip. Even as Marrec watched, the rubbery flesh closed up where he'd torn it. Recollection trickled into his mind: The best way to put a troll down for good was with fire.

Marrec yelled, "Burn it!" and swung the shaft of his spear low along the ground, surprising the troll; it has been expecting another stab. It stumbled over the shaft and fell on its face, a victim of Marrec's trip.

The unicorn warrior turned tail and retreated, even as the troll pushed itself upright with its preternaturally long arms. Still, he put a little space between himself and the beast, just enough, he hoped.

Seizing her opportunity despite her exhaustion, Ususi skipped another bead of flame down the bowl. The troll attempted to evade, but the pellet bounced once, twice, and at the summit of its third skip, exploded into a sphere of raging flame. The troll was enveloped. When the fire faded into sizzling wisps a heartbeat later, the monster survived only as a flaming remnant that sent up a pillar of black smoke.

The stench wrinkled Marrec's nose. He grinned nonetheless, but the sound of the dizheri, as it bashed and battered against the flesh of blighted volodnis, was yet audible. Apparently the corrupted forest folk, like the troll, were

unconcerned that their master was no more, but only a few remained standing. Gunggari and Elowen then appeared on perimeter of the Mucklestones, fighting their way into the bowl. A final few thrusts with Elowen's sword, a wild swing with Gunggari's warclub, and finally some unlooked for assistance by Marrec from behind ended the threat for good. Nothing stirred in the bowl. Marrec's blood cooled. He stowed Justlance.

CHAPTER 1Q

pulled Briartan down from his cruel shackles. Marrec thought life had fled, but after feeling for a pulse, he detected a faint beat. He wondered if the time had come to use the last few healing spells he'd been saving up for a dire circumstance. Briartan was the only one around who could answer his questions. He glanced at Ash—the girl studied the supine form, but she made no move to use her healing gift. It was up to him then.

He mouthed the words of healing and touched the wounded druid's forehead. The glowing blue threads of healing power rippled from Marrec's arm and wound into Briartan's body. Marrec could feel torn tissues knitting and depleted stores of energy rebounding, but he also immediately realized the truth. Briartan's spirit was wounded to the core. The druid sought only release.

Marrec fought with Briartan's desire. They battled to a temporary compromise. It was the best Marrec could accomplish. He had but one spell of healing remaining. He knew he must choose wisely when and how he would use it.

Briartan's eyes fluttered open.

Elowen grabbed the fallen man's hand. "You're going to be all right, Briartan."

Marrec quietly shook his hood, but Elowen didn't see.

The wounded druid responded, "Elowen. I'm afraid I can't stay much longer. I've glimpsed higher realms and the promise of infinite plains of green..."

Elowen squeezed the druid's hand "The world needs you here, Briartan. The blightlord is defeated. Stay with us, won't you?"

The druid found the elf's eyes as she leaned over his prostrate form. He said softly, "I will answer your questions, that you may have some aid of me, but more than that I cannot promise."

Elowen stifled a gasp, looking for confirmation from Marrec and found it in the cleric's sad nod. The elf's eyes began to shimmer with retained tears. She squeezed Briartan's hand all the tighter.

Marrec began to phrase his questions internally, but Ususi moved in, undeterred by Marrec's need or Briartan's fragile-state.

She said, "What did Gameliel want here? How did he overcome your defenses of the Mucklestones?"

Briartan gave a weak chuckle. "Ususi, I knew I'd see you before the end. Too bad you couldn't have arrived earlier. What does anyone want with the Mucklestones? Control. The kind of control one might gain if he had quick access to all corners of Faerun." Briartan ended with a cough.

"How did Gameliel overcome you?" repeated Ususi.

"Why, he surprised me. He sent the sickened pine folk to me. I thought they were seeking a cure. I labored for days on reversing the rot which afflicted them, before I realized the truth; they would never be cured. What I didn't realize was that their sickness was aimed like an arrow at me and my hospitality. By letting them breach the circle, I also allowed in Gameliel. He overcame me and wrested from me control over the Keystone."

Ususi started, then rose from her haunches. She moved toward where Gameliel had last stood.

"Briartan?" Elowen breathed. "Are you in too much pain?"

The druid turned his head so that his gaze could rest more easily on the hunter. "Ah, Elowen, don't be sad. I am so glad that you are here, that you are here to see me off. Please,

explain my fate to the Nentyarch who sits-in-exile in Yeshelmaar. The Nentyarch must know what has happened here:"

"Yeshelmaar?" she blurted.

"You've been away from the fold for quite some time, then, Elowen?" ventured Briartan. He continued, "Yes, seek both the Council of Lethyr and the Nentyarch in Yeshelmaar. Bring him the Keystone."

Marrec wanted to ask his own questions, but Elowen needed a moment with her friend. He glanced up to see what Ususi was doing. The mage was crouched, studying the scattered debris of the blightlord's possessions.

Elowen, trying to keep the druid engaged, said, "I'd hoped that the Nentyarch was still in the Rawlinswood. If he's taken a seat in Yeshelmaar, it must mean the Rotting Man was too strong for even the Nentyarch. When I left on my mission, Yeshelmaar was being prepared as a possible seat-in-exile. I hoped it would not come to pass." She bit her lip then asked, "Briartan, was Gameliel acting as an emissary of the Rotting Man?"

"You know he was, and he is but the least of the blightlords who give their allegiance to the Talontyr. Anammelech's unnatural tread causes the forest to shiver, and Damanda is nearly a power in her own right, yet she has the ear of the Rotting Man." The conversation

was fast sapping the druid's last reserves of strength. Briartan's eyes began to stray upward, attempting to focus on vistas invisible to the living.

"Briartan," Marrec jumped in, realizing the druid was close to departing, "I have traveled far seeking answers. The goddess Lurue, who you may know, is losing contact with many of her servants, me included. My quest is to renew that connection. My quest has led me first to this strange child, who we call Ash, and also the Child of Light, and now to you. It seems that, for reasons I don't understand the Rotting Man wants the girl. More than that, I need to know

who this girl is, and why she is important to Lurie. Do you have any answers for me, great druid?"

Briartan considered Marrec's speech a moment before responding. Then he said, "I know of Lurie, the Unicorn Queen. She may have quieted her connection to you, but if she has, it is most assuredly for a good reason. It is strange, though—I do not sense that all connections of the Unicorn Queen and the world have weakened as yours has. You must seek the Nentyarch for your answers—he has time I lack." Briartan paused, straining to gather more breath. His color, briefly renewed by Marrec's craft, was failing once more.

Ash wandered up of her own accord and fixed the dying druid with her guileless stare.

Seeing her, Briartan's eyes widened. "This is the child?"

Marrec nodded.

Briartan made a reverent sign with a shaking hand. He said, "Yes, she is special; I can see that with even my failing eyes. Keep her safe, unicorn warrior. One day, this Child of Light will answer to the Rotting Man's depredations." He broke into a fit of coughing. The druid's time was drawing to a close.

Briartan's cough subsided. He fixed his gaze straight up. At last he whispered, "The cycle of life may not be denied. Death gives way to life, and life..."

The druid's gaze remained fixed even as his breath whispered away, rising in to penetrate the boughs and branches that hid the clearing from the sky above. Never more would the wisdom of the druid of Lethyr grace the forests.

Marrec closed Briartan's eyes. A tear traced a path from Elowen's full eyes down her cheek. She spoke then in the language of the elves.

Though Marrec knew only a few fragments of the sylvan tongue, it seemed that Elowen was asking for blessings and aid to Briartan's spirit from a series of elven deities and great spirits of the forest.

When she finished, Elowen stood. She said simply, "He will be missed," then walked to the edge of the clearing, seeking solace in the uncontaminated growth beyond the stone circle.

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Later, they laid Briartan to rest according to the rites of elves and druids. When finished with that solemn duty, the five rested in the bowl of the Mucklestones. Already the rot and crusted growths that had overtaken the stone circle were receding. The power of the stones was greater than that of the Rotting Man, at least without one of his blightlord emissaries present.

Gunggari had offered condolences to Elowen earlier, but the wisdom of Osse was apparently too gruff for the elven palate. Elowen continued to sit, facing away from the rest of the group, staring into the trees.

Ususi spoke up, after a long silence. "Briartan was my friend, too, in his own way. He allowed me my researches. I will continue in your company, if you'll have me." She looked up, meeting Marrec's eye.

Marrec raised an eyebrow. "I thought you'd go back to Two Stars. The Mucklestones are clear."

"If I'm not welcome, then Two Stars is where I'll go, of course," responded Ususi.

"Don't misunderstand me; there is nothing I'd like better than your aid," said Marrec, trying to keep his voice from sounding testy. "I've rarely seen your skill with wizardry equaled. Plus, we enjoy your company."

Out of sight of Ususi, the Oslander cocked his head. Marrec read it as a sign of amusement.

"Good!" exclaimed Ususi, smiling, which was an event in and of itself. "Then I have good news. I can get us to Yeshelmaar quickly over the course of a single march."

Elowen finally broke her silence, saying "Via the Mucklestones?"

Ususi nodded, "I can reroute one of the main portal lines

from here to there. With the Keystone, once in the keeping of Briartan, I can do it with little effort." The woman produced a polished, amber colored stone with a natural looking hole piercing its center. The stone was strung on a leather thong. As Ususi handled it, the stone brightened, giving off a glow all its own.

Elowen gave Ususi an appraising look.

Ususi said, "I know, Elowen. I know. The Keystone shall go back to the keeping of the Nentyarch, but we shall reach the Nentyarch all the sooner if I use it, even without his blessing."

"So be it," said the elf.

Gunggari spoke up, "Shall we leave immediately?"

"It will take more than a few minutes to set up our route. I must make preparations using the Keystone. The dimensional referents must be navigated then posted."

Marrec lifted an eyebrow and put on exaggerated expression of confusion. For his trouble, he received a flicker of amusement from the mage. She realized, just perhaps, that her language might be perceived as slightly humorous to those who had not the slightest idea of what it meant. Progress, Marrec hoped.

Ususi rose and approached the perimeter of the circle. She moved to stand between the gap in two stones that faced generally west. She grasped the Keystone, which then glowed with light as strong as a torch but steadier. Ususi held it in the palm of her left hand. She closed her eyes, standing quietly. After a few minutes of studying the mage's preparations, Marrec realized there probably wouldn't be any other signs of Ususi's mystical navigation, or was she 'posting,' whatever that meant?

He pulled himself to his feet and approached Ash. The girl sat on the grassy floor of the bowl staring at her hands, as she had been doing for the last several minutes. Marrec pulled out her bedroll and gently laid the child down for a nap. Without complaint, the child sighed and fell into a light

sleep. He lightly touched the girl's face with the back of his hand, considering her plight.

"What's your part in all this?" Another thought struck him.

"Who are your parents, little one? Your real parents, I mean. I bet they're worried about you. A parent always worries..."

Ash began to snore, very light, but audibly and endearing.

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Young Marrec's mind reeled at Thanial's revelation.

Who... what? Snakes? He scrubbed at his head, feeling again the scars hidden by his hairline. His fingers shrank from the touch.

A dark bubble rose from the shrouded recesses of his consciousness, prodded by Thanial's words. The bubble popped. Images and feelings of a forgotten childhood flooded the young man.

... He was happy. He scampered down a forest path, screaming in childish delight, clutching his rattle. He was playing his favorite game with Aunt Sthenno. Hide and Seek! He laughed and dived beneath a holly bush.

"Where are you, little one?" called the voice of his aunt, farther up along the path.

Young Marrec managed to stifle a giggle. He squirmed back beneath the bush. Aunt Sthenno had been known to miss him before. Not so Aunt Euryale. That's why he didn't play Hide and Seek any more with her. She was no fun.

Mother never played. She left games for her two sisters. She was always involved in her work, though she made time for her boy for an hour every night. Sometimes she spoke wistfully to Marrec about his dear departed father, but Marrec was too young to understand her meaning. His aunts never liked it when Mother brought up that topic, responding with, "It could never have worked, sister. He was not of our kind. He was so vulnerable." That only made Mother sad. For little Marrec, it was just more talk that he was too young to comprehend.

"Are you... here?" Sthenno was still a little way down the path. She was looking under a stone she had pried up with her foot. With an effort of will more concentrated than he'd thought possible, young Marrec managed to keep from laughing at his aunt's antics. She moved a little farther down the path and peered into the tiny knothole of a tree. "Here?" The boy clamped his hand over his mouth to keep from chortling aloud.

Sthenno frowned, then moved quickly back the way she'd come. He'd fooled her. Usually, Marrec betrayed his spot with some small noise of childish glee. He grinned, then settled back to wait more comfortably.

It might have been the extra comb of honey he'd taken without Mother's knowledge earlier or perhaps the warm, pleasant day with a cooling breeze that kept him from becoming too hot. Whatever the reason, he fell into a doze, then a true sleep, all cares falling from his child mind.

When Marrec finally startled awake, it was dark. More than that, it was cold, and a night mist had sprung up all around, making the path hard to see and effectively blurring all the points of familiarity that the child had recognized before sleep claimed him.

He didn't like the dark.

Then he couldn't avoid making a small noise, but of alarm, not amusement. The importance of not wandering off had been impressed upon him on several occasions. As far as wandering out in the dark, he'd been explicitly forbidden it, yet there he was. Mother would be so angry!

He broke from his hiding spot then stopped. It really was dark, so dark he couldn't really see where the path lay. He guessed and began walking. When he stumbled into a tree, he began to cry whole-heartedly, no more half-measures on that front. He bawled for his mother.

He imagined her coming upon him just then. She'd tell him it was all right and take him home. She'd reach down, pick him up, and carry him as she so often did. He would run his

fingers through her soft hair, avoiding the thicker, coiling lengths with a fierce life all their own.

CHAPTER H

Ready?" asked Ususi.

Marrec nodded. He stood just behind Ususi, leading her horse and his. He also had hold of Henri's bridle, but Ash was mounted up. Elowen and Gunggari brought up the rear, each leading their own mount.

Ususi stood before the gap between two standing stones where she'd spent the last hour concentrating on the glowing Keystone. It continued to glow, even brighter than before, if possible, clutched in Ususi's left hand. The leather thong the stone was attached to was wound tightly around her wrist.

"So," wondered Marrec, as nothing continued to happen, "we step through and we're there, right?"

"No," responded Ususi. "We step through, and ... you'll see."

The mage began to trace a line in the air between the stones with her left hand as high as she could reach. Where her hand passed, the glow of the Keystone smeared the air, as if chalk on a glass wall. When she bridged the gap, she brought her hand slowly down along the edge of one of the stones, to the grassy ground, back across to the first stone, then up to her starting point. She'd traced a square in the air a little taller than seven feet high and about the same wide. The very moment she finished the circuit, the forest Marrec could see through the glowing square spiraled away like an image sucked down a drain. Then the square was revealed for what it was: a doorway to an arcane other-where. A cool wind blew out of the darkness, brushing Marrec's hair. His horse snorted and pulled back slightly on the lead.

"Follow me," said Ususi. She walked into the darkness, the Keystone held just higher than shoulder level like a lamp.

Passing the gap from forest to darkness was not unlike walking into the face of a chilling waterfall, though Marrec

remained dry on the other side. He stood on what seemed to be a great stone obelisk, fallen on its side. The stone seemed similar to the standing stones from which the Mucklestones were formed but broader. Behind him, the square-shaped discontinuity he had walked through hung unsupported. Through it, he could see his companions waiting their turn to pass into the doorway.

As though bridging a void of cool darkness, the stone path arrowed forward as far as Ususi's light could reach, which was not all that far. A precipitous fall threatened anyone who came too close to either side of the path. Undeterred by the threat, Marrec peered over the side and spied an island of stone far, far below. The island floated alone in the darkness and was moving farther from view even as he watched it. The island was strewn with rubble, and the mostly demolished wall of some ruin gaped up at him. The light seemed to emanate from the walls

themselves, twinkling with witchlight. Gazing around the vast space, he noted tiny flickers of light in every direction, all moving slightly relative to each other.

"What is this place?" he asked Ususi.

Ususi motioned him forward. He realized he continued to hold Henri's reigns, though Ash was still on the other side of the door. He carefully led his and Ususi's mount, and Henri, through the discontinuity, moving to stand near Ususi. Elowen and Gungari followed.

Finally Ususi said, "This is an ancient space, a half-space, where forgotten things litter the void. If not for the Mucklestones, I doubt it could still even be accessed."

From behind, Gungari said, "It seems unnatural."

"It is," replied Ususi. "It is an artificial space created many thousands of years ago by a race known as the Imaskar. They used it to store their secrets, their refuse, and their... mistakes. The Mucklestones can create paths through it, shortcutting real world leagues."

"Imaskar?" asked Marrec.

"Mistakes?" said Elowen simultaneously.

Ususi said, "The Imaskar are... were a vanished race of wizards. They accomplished great things in their time, but they are gone from the face of Faerun. Sometimes even mighty wizards can make dangerous mistakes." Marrec thought she would say more, but she turned and said, "We'd best get moving. We'll see enough of the Celestial Nadir to suit us—we've still got several hours of walking. I'd suggest riding, but I'm afraid the horses would spook off the path. I've never risked it."

"Hold on," said Marrec. "I'm not sure I like this talk of mistakes and danger. We've got Ash with us, after all. Perhaps we should go the long way around?"

Ususi paused then said with an impatient strain to her voice, "In fact, I doubt the mistakes of the ancient days survive today. I spoke of danger, but in the past tense. In all my studies of the Mucklestones, I've never run across anything especially threatening. Briartan scarcely used the stones, 'tis true, but he also never faced a real threat. I don't think Gameliel had access long enough to further taint this space."

Elowen noted, "If all things were equal, we would go by natural paths, but I think the risks are higher were we to take the 'long' way around. There are more blightlords than Gameliel. The Rotting Man is after Ash, it's clear. He's set up ambushes before. If we can get to Yeshelmaar through this hidden route, and quickly, we may be better off."

"I agree with the elf," threw in Gunggari.

Marrec made a dismissive gesture with the hand not holding the leads, saying, "Fine, fine, I can see when I'm outnumbered." He grinned. "Really, I'd hate to give up a chance to walk through an artificial, hidden dimension created by a vanished race."

Ususi allowed a smile to play on her lips. "You won't be disappointed. Come. There are also wondrous things to see here."

They began to walk along the path. Straight as a ruler the path appeared before them, revealed by the advancing light of the Keystone held aloft by Ususi. Behind them, the discontinuity closed like an eyelid closing.

The air was sharp, chill like morning air, but not damp. A faint odor hung in the air, but Marrec couldn't place it. It reminded him of the smell in the air after a thunder storm. Sometimes, a light breeze would blow up out of the void and play through his hair. Marrec was worried the breeze's intensity would increase, but Ususi told him not to worry on that account.

To the left and right, above and below, objects floated in and out of view. Most of the objects were free-floating islands of earth, rough and crumbling below,, but flat on top, except for some ruin of disintegrating construction so far degraded that it was impossible to tell what purpose they once served. It was as if some great hand had scooped up these sites from the natural world and set them adrift in the void. Marrec mentally labeled the floating islands 'earthbergs.'

He saw a few perfect cubes, each face a mirror, tumbling through the darkness. When he saw his third he asked Ususi about them.

She said, "You really are interested in the Imaskar mistakes, aren't you? Those are them, safely ensconced in those time-starved cubes. If you don't bother them, they won't bother you."

Marrec considered, then said, "You've learned a lot about the Imaskar people since you began to study the Mucklestones. They seem an interesting people."

Ususi continued walking ahead of him, so he couldn't see her face. She didn't say anything for a while then said, "Perhaps one day I will tell you more about the Imaskari, but today is not that day."

Marrec glanced back at Gunggari, whom he could barely pick out in the periphery of the light. They shared a look; the

woman was as stiff as the day they'd met, stiffer actually. A little while later Ususi glanced up then raised her hand. "Stop here a moment."

Marrec followed the mage's gaze upward. A great globule of liquid hung in the void, the glints of distant lights reflected in its shimmering, fluctuating surface. He could actually hear the sounds of waves lapping on the surface of the globe. It was floating slowly toward contact with the stone path ahead of them. At first Marrec couldn't gauge the globule's size. As it continued to move closer and closer without actually touching, its size became clear. It was a few hundred yards in diameter.

"What's this?" asked Marrec.

Ususi said, "Just more random debris—probably collected humidity, but I don't want to get wet."

Finally the wavering globe of liquid intersected the disconnected stone path ahead with an audible slap. Marrec tensed, expecting the sphere to pop like a giant bubble, but nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, the liquid mass merely continued on its way, barely affected by the long stone column sweeping through its interior. Finally, over a minute later, contact fell away, and the globule continued its lonely journey through the void.

Marrec continued to watch. Behind the meniscus of water, a humanoid form showed itself to Marrec, its eyes flaring in the light of the Keystone. "Hey!" he yelled, but even as he gestured, it was gone.

"What?" sighed Ususi.

"I thought I saw something, a creature, inside that globule. It had big eyes, like plates."

Ususi shrugged, "Perhaps you did. Another reason to stay clear of the wandering lakes."

Ahead, the stone path was wet, and residual water pooled in shallow cavities of the rock. A few tiny forms flipped up and fell back to the stone with wet smacks. Fish. A few flipped themselves off the path. Without the floating water, they fell

quickly into the emptiness.

Ususi studied the remaining creatures then said, "We can proceed. Careful; the stone will be slick until the water dries."

They moved on. Marrec studied the struggling fish as they edged across the damp portion of the path. They were eyeless, like some varieties of cave fish he'd heard about. They'd obviously been there a long time, through many generations.

He wanted to catch up to Ususi, but he had three mounts to see to, including Henri on which Ash rode. If he couldn't be discreet, he'd have to be crass.

"Come on, Ususi," he finally called ahead. "If we've got hours on this path, give a little. This place is amazing. Tell us more about it."

When the mage continued to walk quietly, he pressed, "At least tell me what I saw in that 'wandering lake.'"

Another sigh came from the wizard. "Very well. Keep in mind I do not know too terribly much more than you.

"The Imaskari, extremely powerful and haughty wizards who worked great wonders with magic and created portals to many worlds, established one of the earliest human empires in Faerun. They were eventually brought down by slaves they'd kidnapped from other worlds; those people are now the folk of Mulhorand and Unther."

"Portals ... you mean like the Mucklestones?" wondered Marrec.

"Yes. They preferred a buffer between their portal endpoints, just in case. The Celestial Nadir was created to be that buffer. Originally, it was a small space, but after its creation, it slowly grew over the centuries, becoming a demiplane in its own right."

Ususi continued speaking, warming to her topic, "More and more with the passage of time, the artificial plane served the Imaskari as a dumping ground for defeated enemies, objects stolen from other planes too dangerous to deal with

immediately, and as a safehouse for valuables. However, even after the fall of the Imaskar empire, the Nadir continued to grow. It is my belief that in the thousands of years since then and now, the space has impinged upon other dimensions and demiplanes, enveloping them, and growing all the larger for it. Thus, the Nadir is more than it originally was intended to be. On the other hand, of the portals that once extended through its core to service the Imaskar empire, only the Mucklestones remain, at least as far as I have been able to discover."

Marrec gazed out into the void, noting the firefly points as they drifted into and out of view. He realized that those points represented only motes of earth or objects that were somehow illuminated. Perhaps many others drifted unseen in the dark. He said, "What wonders could one find here, if he looked?"

"That is a question to which I have yearned to know, myself, though exploration of the Nadir could prove dangerous," said Ususi. "The Mucklestones are important to me. That is another reason I must see this thing through.

I have to learn how much the Rotting Man knows of the Celestial Nadir, and if he intends further incursions. As I've said, some things that lie here should not be disturbed. There is a reason the Imaskar empire fell, beyond that of simple revolt, I believe. It is my fear that a remnant of that power might lie herein, unremembered, but potent should it be disturbed."

Elowen had moved closer, leaving her mount in Gunggari's care. She said, "You always said... I mean, what, if not a slave revolt, brought down the empire?"

"I do not know for sure," murmured Ususi, "but I know one thing; it does not bear meddling if a taint of that power lingers here."

After that they continued their march without speaking for some tens of minutes. Marrec was contemplating empty places of the universe, when Gunggari's low voice

interrupted his leaping thoughts.

The Oslander said, "Something is here with us."

They stopped. Peering back along the stone track into the deepening gloom, Marrec asked, "What?"

"Something that buzzes. It is not confined to the path. The buzzing sound puts me in mind of an insect, a large insect. I've been hearing it since before the water bubble crossed our path, but it's getting louder now."

Marrec couldn't hear it, but he knew Gunggari's senses were sharper than his own. He continued to cast his gaze behind, but Gunggari shook his head.

"It is ahead of us. We're drawing closer to it."

Ususi said, "The only way out is through; we must go forward."

Marrec nodded, and they continued.

It wasn't long before all could hear the faint buzzing. It did sound like an insect, sort of like a horsefly, but deeper.

Ususi volunteered, "I don't know that sound, but look there." She pointed to the stone path ahead.

Marrec saw that the flat column of stone continued on straight ahead without deviation, but there was a strange sheen to it, unlike the stone over which they'd already walked. The stone almost appeared to be coated with crystal, like the interior of a geode but without the brilliant color.

He asked, "What is it?"

Ususi shrugged, shaking her head. "It is a mystery to me, but it's interesting to look at." "Great."

They continued moving but slower. The thin crystalline lattice below their feet crunched with each step. While not slippery, the uneven footing made the broad path seem a bit narrower and more precarious.

"I spy a mist ahead. It covers the path, but we must pass through it. Let us slow down a bit," said Ususi.

Marrec realized that she was referring to the pale, wispy-white mist that was coming into the light shed by the

Keystone lamp. It billowed like a cloud ahead of them, a vast cloud that had settled upon the path.

Ususi continued, "Let me go ahead and make certain it is safe to enter. I expect that it is harmless... but I would rather be sure." She seemed less sure of herself.

They waited as Ususi strode to the periphery of the diaphanous cloud. As she approached, the mist churned and gave way just slightly. The mage raised her other hand and concentrated. Arcane syllables fell from her lips.

Finally she turned and said, "Ectoplasm. It is ephemeral and harmless. I am not sure why it has been drawn into this space; it is normally a purely astral phenomenon."

Marrec was not familiar with astral phenomena, but he thought that the milky strands and gossamer draperies lent the path a dreamlike quality. He motioned for the rest of the group to follow behind. As they moved forward, the geode-like quality of the path became more apparent. He decided that the mist and the crystal were associated. The buzzing grew louder.

"Be alert," called Elowen from behind. "That noise has a predatory sound to it—it is something a hunter might make to flush out prey or freeze it with fear."

Marrec sighed but managed to get Justlance from its sheath on his back with one hand while maintaining a grip on the horses, and not a moment too soon.

A white-bodied creature punched through the mist from above, its buzz becoming a roar of rapid-beating wings. It was like an albino wasp, though a wasp grown as large as a man. Its wings, stinger, and even its eyes were milk white. It almost seemed a sculpture of purest ivory, though animate and hungry. As it stooped on Ususi, Marrec cast Justlance.

His spear leapt at the swooping monster; the creature broke off its dive seconds before striking the mage to avoid the spear. Justlance continued its trajectory into the void. Marrec felt a moment of disquiet, watching his spear drop away; he didn't fully understand the properties of the artificial space.

What if... Justlance slapped back into his grip, and he stopped worrying.

He could hear Ususi muttering,.. should have dis-cor-porated long ago—what could allow a construct to persist so long? Maybe it's newly constructed..."

"Heads up!" shouted Marrec.

The white wasp returned for another pass. He worried that it didn't have to bring its stinger to bear to make a lethal attack. It only had to knock one of them off the path.

Two arrows, one following the other by only a few hands' breadths, hissed into the beast's abdomen. Elow-en's work. The creature wavered, but it didn't squeal or even bleed. He made a new conjecture—the monstrous white wasp was composed of compacted white mist, the 'ectoplasm,' that surrounded them.

The arrows hurt it. Its buzzing was erratic. Emboldened, he threw Justlance straight into the creature. The shaft of the spear continued through the creature's body, exiting the other side. Apparently that was too much

disruption. The buzz of its rapidly beating wings ceased, and it dropped like a stone in a well, striking the stone path hard. The slap of impact was loud and ultimately lethal. The creature misted away, evaporating into so many disconnected milky strands. Marrec's intuition had been right.

"Interesting 'astral phenomena' you have here, Ususi, but let's go," he decided. "There could be more."

They began to move again but were still hindered by the uneven footing. Not more than twenty paces further along they discovered the source of the milky haze.

Ususi stood before a sort of outcropping on the path, or perhaps it was more like a gargantuan sculpture had fallen upon the path. It was a sculpture of real stone, too, unlike the wasp formed of clingy mist. The force of the sculpture's fall had apparently broken it in two, for only the upper half of the figure, which resembled the rough form of a muscular

man, remained; the midriff and lower portion must have dropped away in the darkness. The interior of the split sculpture was hollow and truly resembled a geode with its rough crystal coating. The hollow was large enough that two people could walk abreast into it. Purplish light was strong within that cavity, but it was impossible to see what generated the light without entering.

Ususi made as if to do just that, an eager expression animating her normal placid features.

"Ususi!" exclaimed Marrec and Elowen simultaneously.

The mage paused, her gaze sweeping across the group before finally coming to rest on Ash. She had the grace to look just the slightest bit guilty.

Marrec said, "That's right. We're not here to explore. We need to get Ash out of here. We're putting her in jeopardy by our mere presence. We've already faced more threat than you indicated was possible here."

Ususi didn't move, torn between her task and her urge to explore.

Elowen coaxed the mage, "You can explore later, after we've gotten through to Yeshelmaar. Leave the exit open, and you can return on this very route."

"Very well," sighed Ususi. "Of course you're right. Even after the Nentyarch relieves me of the Keystone, if I leave the exit open, any of us could return along this path."

They marched past the enigmatic half-figure, its interior glowing with mystery.

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CHAPTER 12

Xhe Great Dale is a long, fertile vale running three hundred miles east from the town of Uth-mere, a port city on the Sea of Fallen Stars. The Great Dale divides the Forest of Lethyr from the dark and deadly Rawlinswood, two of the greatest forests of Faerun. Governed by a council of druids, the independent clanholds of the Great Dale stand amid the ancient ruins of old Narfell, a demon-haunted realm whose

dark legacy still threatens the surrounding lands even a thousand years after its destruction.

Near the center of the Great Dale, a great rocky tor rises from Lethyr forest. A pristine lake of clear, cold water stands at the foot of the hill. Carved into the tor is an old wood elf stronghold known as Yeshelmaar.

A hole opened in empty air near the tor. From it issued several travelers and their mounts: Two

women (one an elf), two men (one dressed quite barbarically), and a child on a pony. They travelers walked their mounts out of the dark into the grass. Horses and people seemed relieved to have reached the end of their journey.

Marrec studied the great fortress of natural stone and fitted blocks that crowned the great tor. "Yeshelmaar?"

The elf woman, Elowen, nodded confirmation. "The Nentyarch's seat-in-exile, if Briartan was right. Look," she gestured to the top of the natural fortress, where great green banners cracked and blew in the wind. "The banner on the right signifies the Circle of Leth, the one on the left, the Nentyarch. It is true; he is here."

"This place looks old. What was it before the Nentyarch took over?" wondered Gunggari.

Elowen responded, "This fortress was built in the days when the Lethyr elves were faced with destruction at the hands of the Empire of Narfell, a sinister force to the north, but such battles are long past. The threat of old Narfell is long gone, but so are the elven-folk of Lethyr. Of the wood elves who once lived nearby, only a few small villages survive. The Circle decided the fortress would make an ideal base. When pressed, I guess the Nentyarch did, too."

"Where were the Circle and the Nentyarch before?"

"The Nentyarch and his High Druids formerly dwelled together at Dun-Tharos in the Rawlinswood," said Elowen in a low tone.

Before she could say more, several elves issued from a low gate on the hill and moved forward. They were dressed in

the colors of the Circle and wore leathers, bore equipment, and were branded with insignia not dissimilar to Elowen's. All had bows in hand but refrained from nocking arrows.

Elowen moved forward waving, and called, "Hail, hunters. I've returned with important news for the Circle and for the Nentyarch himself."

The approaching elves stopped short, grins breaking out on many of their faces. One who seemed less pleased continued forward, a man with darker green leather armor and a silver leaf-shaped pin clasping a sea-green cloak on his back. He eyed Elowen and the rest of the group carefully, paying particular attention to Gunggari, before returning his gaze to Elowen.

He said, "So the lone hunter deigns to return to the fold, after an absence of over two years."

Elowen flushed but said calmly, "You know why, Fallon. I promised the Nentyarch that I would discover the origin of the blighted volodnis and what they sought to the south. I have discovered an answer to both of these questions, though more questions have surfaced. I have come to speak to Nentyarch."

The other elf frowned, "Reports are customary during the interim of so long an absence, I need not remind you."

Elowen's chin jutted forward, "Let us see what the Circle has to say about it; such matters are not for a hunter to determine. As far as I can see, you are still a Nentyar hunter, Fallon."

Marrec cleared his throat, interrupting what may have been a heated response on Fallon's part, and said, "We seek an audience with the Nentyarch. We have information that bears directly on his governance of the forest and the movements of his enemy, the Rotting Man."

The elves all blanched at that name. Fallon said with ill grace, "The Nentyarch does not turn away those who seek him. However, his Spring Court has concluded for the day. He will receive you tomorrow."

"Hold on," began Marrec, but Elowen laid a restraining hand on his arm.

She looked at Fallon and said, "Tomorrow is fine."

Fallon turned, saying, "Then follow me. We can put all of you up tonight in guest quarters. You can freshen up, visit the Yeshelmaar market, small as it is, and restore yourselves before you see the Nentyarch, tomorrow, but,"

he paused before forging ahead, "Elowen must come with us. We must take her before the Circle of Leth. It is they whom a hunter must answer to, and it is from the Circle any admonishment shall come."

Gunggari had moved up to stand abreast of Marrec and Elowen as they spoke with Fallon. He said, "We would not stand here were it not for Elowen. Make sure your Circle knows that."

"Don't worry, Gunggari," said Elowen. "I'll be fine. After the Circle hears my report, I'll come find you all. We shall meet the Nentyarch tomorrow."

They approached the fortress.

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The fortress of Yeshelmar was built originally as a simple keep on a hilltop. During the course of the wars with Narfell, it grew, both higher and deeper into the rock of the tor. Stonework piled on brickwork as roofs became balconies for elevated watch posts, as walls became foundations for higher walls, and as basements became the origin for yet deeper halls and armories cut into the earth.

Each addition added new spires and pinnacles, chimneys for fireplaces, and vents for the deepest chambers where golden lamplight was the only hope of illumination in otherwise tenebrous halls. The congestion of construction thrust aloft a mighty work of stone; it was difficult to pick out where the natural stone of the hillside let off and the handiwork of elves picked up. Slender walkways threaded the tallest spires, while curling stairways provided external access to many of the towers and lower balconies. In many

places, actual trees rooted in great earth-filled stone planters rose, providing soothing breaks in the otherwise stern stonework. Green ivy grew over the sides of many of the walls. Despite the clutter and age-worn look, and even despite

its military feel, Yeshelmaar yet retained a feeling of an elven holding.

The travelers were led past the great valves of iron and stone that served as the main gates of Yeshelmaar into a wide, square-cut tunnel flagged with granite. The tunnel sloped steeply upward, but the flagged floor provided exceptional footing. Many small side tunnels on either side opened into unguessed chambers, hidden in darkness, but the main passage was lit with great lamps. Ahead and above, the light of day also leaked in. After ascending the slope over the course of a minute, the group of travelers and their escorts left the tunnel, entering a wide courtyard open to the sky but enclosed by the towering walls and spires all around. The travelers' mounts were stabled at that level, after which they were finally shown to their quarters.

Marrec's room was high up on the south side of the fortress, and overlooked the lake and road below. His chamber opened onto a rooftop garden, which was filled with greenery and flowers right up to the edge of a sheer plunge down the stony walls of Yeshelmaar, all the way down to the pristine surface of the lake and the hard cobbles of the road. Marrec and his friends had been warned not to venture too close to the garden's edge.

His friends, all except for Elowen, were given rooms off the same hallway where the elves had put him. In fact, his and Ususi's rooms shared the same garden. She walked about it, apparently taking a mental inventory of the types of plants and flowers she was unfamiliar with.

Marrec joined her in the garden. He would try a friendly gesture and attempt some small talk with the mage. "What are you looking at?" he asked, coming up beside Ususi.

"Flowers."

Marrec swallowed. "It is certainly a pleasant evening." "I suppose."

Silence interposed between them and grew to a span Marrec found uncomfortable.

Marrec said, "You seem a bit short in temper this evening. Perhaps you would prefer that I leave you alone to your observations?"

Ususi shrugged then surprised Marrec with, "No. Stay. I have few conversations with people, and even less with those from so far to the west. Please, tell me of the lands from which you hail."

"Very well," Marrec said with a smile.

See? He thought. Reach out a little, and you shall be rewarded.

Marrec continued, "What do you know of the Sea of Fallen Stars? You've heard of it, then? How about fabled Waterdeep?"

Later, his conversation with Ususi concluded, he returned to his room. The mage proved to be a good listener, which was a trait rare in Marrec's experience. Usually, in purely social situations, it was he who listened and the other who talked, telling Marrec of himself, his triumphs, his children, or the happenings in his day. When Marrec did get a word in edgewise about himself, it was clear that many people used that time to formulate what they would say when they next had their chance, instead of listening in return and showing that they had listened by asking a question related to what had just been said.

Ususi wasn't like that. For that matter, neither was Gunggari, probably why he and the Oslander had struck up a friendship and traveling arrangement.

Of course, when it came to listening, none could top the ever-quiet Ash.

Marrec was Ash's putative guardian, and she shared his room. She sat on a small bed brought up to the room by a

servant after Marrec inquired if something more accommodating to her small frame might be had. Marrec studied the girl, looking for any changes. As always, no expression crossed her face as she stared without sound out the open door opening onto the garden.

He sighed and seated himself next to her.

"Well, girl, here we are, and I don't know if we're any closer to finding out your role in all this."

He held up a small, delicately carved stone vessel for her to drink from. When she was finished, Marrec continued, "You and me, we're a lot alike, you know."

He wondered if he had told the same thing to Ash before. Probably. Undeterred, he continued, "I was a foundling, same as you, and like you I was not... am not... entirely human."

He stopped, studying the girl's face for any hint of surprise. Nothing.

"I'm not a healer like you, though. My ability ... is more destructive. It's a burden. I've done things that I'm ashamed to admit."

He sighed. Thoughts he had tried to bottle up over the last few years began to bubble to the surface of his mind, and his lips.

"I can't help but wonder if my past... crime... is somehow responsible for Lurue's disfavor with me? Maybe this is all some sort of test, or quest, for me to finally cleanse the monster that lives within me, finally repudiate it once and for all."

Ash began to trace the lines of stone faintly visible behind the wall plaster. Her wide blue eyes reflected a gulf of emptiness, or Marrec dared hope, acceptance.

"If you are somehow connected with Lurue, then you know what I've done. You know my vow, too; that never again shall I call upon the power of my heritage, lest ill once again befall me or befall those I hold most dear."

Marrec cleared his throat, and went on, "That vow sustained me in the early years of my service to the goddess. All

seemed well. I thought it was all behind me, but with this gradual quieting, and my loss of contact with her divine spark, I just wonder..."

He whispered, "Is it my crime? What more must I do to gain forgiveness?"

He reached forward and touched Ash's brow with a finger. The girl turned, gave him the tiniest of smiles, then went back to tracing mortar lines.

Marrec spoke no more, but the memory of what he had done would not be bottled up.

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The ranger Thaniel's revelation was nothing short of a life-altering shock. Could young Marrec really be born of creatures he'd been taught to fear and despise all his life? How could he deny it? His memories were proof enough, not to mention the power of his gaze unleashed. The power to replace flesh with unmoving, unliving stone...

"It is an evil thing you tell me, Thaniel."

"Can knowledge by itself be evil? Only the use to which we put it. Not telling you about your parentage—that might be considered evil. When you know the truth, you are free to make the best decisions possible. With the time we've spent together, I've come to know your character, and you are good."

Someone pounded on the exterior of Thaniel's cabin door. The grizzled ranger gave Marrec's shoulder a reassuring squeeze then saw to the caller.

It was a boy from the village, babbling of another attack. The ogre raiders had returned to the village, vengeful and more cruel in the wake of their ignominious retreat months earlier. Worse, a truly abominable ogre, nearly double the size of the others, led the raid. The boy said the village elders had sent him. He pled for Thaniel's help in driving off the threat, not recognizing Marrec, who was older and attired similarly to the ranger.

Thaniel grunted, "I will come." He glanced at Marrec. "And

my apprentice, too."

The ranger shrugged into his leathers; Marrec did the same. His leather armor was another gift from his benefactor. Thaniel grabbed his sword, Marrec his wooden spears, and they were off through the forest. Thaniel told the boy from the village to stay in his cabin. The young villager was too exhausted to protest.

A dark form paced them, partially visible through the trees. It was Thaniel's companion, the great wolf Shira. Marrec felt better knowing that Shira would be with them.

Just before they reached the village, Thaniel paused. They could hear screams and the clang of steel through the trees. They were close.

Thaniel said, "Marrec, this is an opportunity for you to use your abilities for good. Stifling them can't be healthy; they are part of you. Your actions define your nature, not your heritage or the sins of your forebears. Defend the village any way that you can."

Marrec took a deep breath and simply nodded.

Thaniel leaped out of the trees and ran for the village gates, Marrec on his heels. Shira rushed ahead.

The first ogre they saw was dead, surrounded by three villagers, also slain, just within the gates. Beyond was the town square. A dozen ogres swarmed the courtyard, each twice the size of an ordinary villager, but the ogres in turn were dwarfed by their leader. They swarmed around the feet of what may have been a giant in truth, their heads topping that creature's belt.

The overlarge ogre appeared something like a bestial human grown far too big, but it was larger, stronger, and armored in the cured skins of its fallen enemies. In its hand it gripped a wooden club that was twenty feet long if it was an inch. Rusted nails and the fangs of unknown animals protruded from its length.

The sight of the leader's armor, with its sewn limbs, bodies, and faces, stretched and distorted to make a whole

sheet of leather armor, made the gorge rise in Marrec's throat. He stumbled, coughing and retching.

Thaniel was made of sterner stuff. He charged in, slaying an ogre outright with his blade, clearing a path toward the towering ogre leader. Shira followed Thaniel, guarding the ranger's back from the other ogres, a ferocious shape larger than a man herself.

Several villagers, those who were not strewn unmoving around the courtyard, were grouped in a small alley. The giant leading the raid turned his attention from attempting to crush them with his tooth-and-nail-studded club to defend itself against Thaniel's advance. It screamed something unintelligible to Marrec in a foul, phlegmy tongue and brought up its club. Its silhouette was enough to completely shadow the ranger's approach.

Thaniel ducked under the club and stabbed the creature. A flattened human face on the creature's armor clamped its flaccid mouth down on the length of Thaniel's blade, trapping it. The ranger screamed in frustration as he attempted to pull his sword free. No good. The giant ogre laughed. The creature relinquished its grip on its club, and in the same movement snatched up Thaniel.

The ranger struggled in the monster's grip, but the hold was unwavering. The giant raised the ranger to eye level and spoke in Common for the benefit of its victim and anyone else who happened to hear, "I got a few rips in my armor that your skin can patch, except for your left arm. I'll bite it off now; saves time later."

For Marrec, time slowed. It seemed that the illumination in the courtyard dimmed but for a fey light that picked out his mentor and the giant ogre. The creature laughingly manipulated Thaniel in its grip, trying to get the man's arm to stick out as he might pose a doll.

"No!" screamed Marrec.

Pain lanced his eyes, as if ice picks had thrust out from each orb. He locked eyes on the beast and willed it to stop,

and it did.

A grayness overtook it, and its terrible skin armor became a gray tide rising on its fleshy beach. Its chest, head, legs, and arms became as stone.

Something was wrong. The tide of mineral gray did not stop with the monster but extended to the victim caught in the giant's cruel grapple. He'd caught Thanial in his stony gaze. The entire edifice of stone, man and monster, swayed. The creature had transitioned from flesh to mineral while in mid-step. Down it came, tons of weight slamming down upon the courtyard cobbles. The crash of the shattering, pulverized stone caught the attention of every creature, both attacker and defender, that was not already aware of the dramatic reversal of the ogre's fortune. A rain of pebbles pelted Marrec, followed by billowing dust. No piece remained whole. Only rubble remained.

He'd slain his mentor.

The ogres, leaderless and afraid, fled, giving Marrec a wide berth.

He'd slain the one person who trusted and understood him.

Shira the great wolf fixed him with an accusatory stare, then leaped away, howling in sorrow.

He'd proved Thanial wrong. His heritage was suspect, and his ability evil. With heavy footsteps, Marrec turned to face the forest. He knew not where he would go, what he would do, or to whom he would pledge himself, but one promise he made immediately and aloud.

"While breath remains to me, my heritage will never again reveal its devilish glare. By this vow, Thanial shall be remembered."

Anammelech rubbed at one of his empty eye sockets, disgorging a goblet of ooze. He'd thought he'd felt some sort of vermin wriggling around in there, but no, it was just an abnormally large accumulation of slime.

When the blackness birthed itself from the air, Anammelech stepped back, alarmed. The void had the shape of a halberd.

The blightlord recognized it. It was Gloomgate. It was the signature weapon his brother-blightlord, Gameliel. Its presence could mean only one thing.

"Gloomgate?" inquired the blightlord. Upon being named, the weapon began to whisper urgent secrets.

Listening to Gloomgate's tale, Anammelech's suspicions were confirmed. The weapon's appearance indicated that Gameliel had fallen. Gloomgate was his. Anammelech permitted

himself a malicious grin.

Who were these enemies of the Rotting Man Gloomgate whispered about so fiercely? A cleric—of Lurue? Anammelech raised an eyebrow. What a strange coincidence.

What's this? The 'Child of Light', too?

Yes. Gloomgate's silken, silent voice was insistent The Child of Light and the Keystone were both heading toward Yeshelmaar. It was a little too perfect. Fate was conspiring to hand Anammelech quick advancement in the Rotting Man's empire. Gameliel was dead, and his only other real rival, Damanda, was too close to the Talontyr's heels to effectively advance the Rotting Man's agenda. Damanda thought boot-licking would get her ahead, but if Anammelech delivered the Child of Light to the Talontyr, Damanda's favored position would be his. His sister blightlord, once out of the direct graces of the Rotting Man, would be subject to Anammelech's long-planned vengeance for past slights, but first things first.

Time to activate one of his most carefully nurtured assets in Yeshelmaar. If he planned it right, he could have the Child of Light delivered to him at the edge of the Rawlinswood without fuss or muss.

Elves were not as difficult to lure into evil as was commonly believed.

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The next day, all the visitors to Yeshelmaar were summoned

to the Spring Court. The court was held in a wide sublevel, delved from living rock below the surface of the tor. Thin shafts tunneled upward to the surface, back down which beams of morning light fell, illuminating the chamber with golden light. A pool of crystal water filled the center of the chamber. In the center of the pool rose a great throne of pale stone. Subtle designs of leafs, vines, and other growing things seemed to slowly swirl and grow throughout the rock, despite being relief carvings.

The Nentyarch sat his throne with calm dignity. He wore a long linen robe of Lethyr green, his symbol of a golden leaf shining on his chest. The sleeves and neck of his robe were trimmed with snow white cotton, which was also the color of the belt girding his waist. On his head was the fabled Circle of Life: a living wooden crown bearing green leaves and slender twigs that held jewels. The jewels glowed with light that waxed and waned over a period of just a few seconds, like breath. The Nentyarch's eyes were silver, and his dark hair was likewise touched by silver at the temples. He was an elf who had tarried long in the world.

Around the far outskirts of the clear pool was assembled the high druids, the Circle of Leth. Elves, humans, and a single dwarf made up that group, each seated on a stone bench, eyes wary and watchful as Marrec, Ash, Gunggari, and Ususi approached.

Standing out before the pool were several of the elves who had greeted the travelers when they'd arrived at Yeshelmaar. Elowen was also there, but so too was sour-faced Fallon.

It was the Spring Court, too. Marrec had learned that since the Nentyarch's coming, Yeshelmaar had become the informal capital of the Great Dale, or at least the eastern half. The folk of the lonely clanholds of the region held a deep reverence for the Nentyarch. Many were in attendance today, seeking the Nentyarch's advice. Perhaps a dozen druids of various ranks and twice that number of rangers, hunters, and foresters were assembled in the back of room,

along with a handful of Dalesfolk who had come to seek the Nentyarch's advice or assistance.

Marrec—leading Ash by the hand—Gunggari, and Ususi were ushered past all those who were there before them, up into the very presence of the Nentyarch, just short of the still pool. The hunters at the head of the hall drew aside to let them pass, and Elowen left their number to join the travelers.

The Circle member to the right and behind the Nentyarch rose, saying, "The Nentyarch is occupied with a fierce contest for the souls of two great forests against Talona's Rotting Man. We have heard how all of you have become entangled in the Rotting Man's designs. Please, tell us more."

The Nentyarch's face remained solemn, kingly even, as he nodded.

As Marrec prepared to speak, Ususi seized the initiative, saying "Great druid, I bring you the token of Briartan. It is the Keystone, long held in safety by the Mucklestones Druid. We could not prevent his fall, but we were able to salvage this relic of a bygone race." She held the Keystone up for all to see.

The Nentyarch spoke, the timbre of his voice a pleasant tenor. "Briartan's fall is known to me. It is with great sadness that I accept the Keystone back into my keeping. The Mucklestones Druid will be greatly missed Few can hope to tread the path upon which he journeyed, to our loss."

Fallon approached, holding a very small a gold-lined chest with an open lid. With poorly concealed regret, Ususi placed the Keystone into the chest.

The Nentyarch said to the mage, "Your integrity is beyond recall. You, more than any other, have a claim to the stone, yet you return it to me despite that. When we have finished with our business here, I will show my gratitude."

Ususi's frown hesitated before smoothing away. Marrec wondered what the Nentyarch meant by his comment about

the mage's claim to the Keystone, but then it was the cleric's turn to speak.

Marrec addressed the Nentyarch, internally reminding himself that the elf was due his respect, "Honored one, I am the servant of Lurue, the Unicorn Queen. I have been on a road long not only in length but also in years. I hope that you may have the answers I seek."

"Your quest is not unknown to me," said the Nentyarch. "My hunter, Elowen, whom we missed in her long absence, has explained your plight and your quest."

Fallon, still standing nearby with the chest holding the Keystone, shot Elowen a frown. She favored him with a small shrug in return, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

Marrec responded, "Then can you tell me for what reason my path has led to this girl, Ash, and now to you? Do you know what her significance is, and... can you tell me what ails Lurue?"

"I can try. Let the girl come to me."

Marrec guided Ash a little closer to the pool, then released her hand.

The Nentyarch studied Ash for a good minute. Quiet reigned in the hall, save for a few small coughs in the back. Finally the Nentyarch said, "I can see there is something more to this girl than meets the eye. If what I suspect is true, then I don't doubt that all the Rotting Man's thoughts and many of his agents are bent on finding this girl you name Ash."

Marrec held his breath, waiting for the revelation.

"But I must be sure." So saying the Nentyarch stood and walked through the crystal pool surrounding his throne. The pool was only a few inches deep. Marrec noticed that the Nentyarch waded through the pool without getting the least bit wet. He stepped out of the shallow pool to stand next to Ash.

"Let us have a better look at you," the Nentyarch murmured. He placed one hand on the girl's shoulder and raised the other above his own head. In his raised hand he held a sprig

of greenery. The girl was unfazed but spoke: "Ash."

The Nentyarch smiled, saying, "I doubt that is your true name. Let us find out, shall we?"

Then he began to utter a series of sharp, ringing syllables, one after the other, which continued to ring through air as if individual voices. As the Nentyarch uttered each new syllable, the ones before it continued to sound, until after just a brief time, a mighty melody of rich sound reverberated through the hidden hall. Still the Nentyarch added to the voice, layering on yet more notes. The slow crescendo slowly built to a sound so intense that many stopped up their ears.

Finally, the Nentyarch brought down his raised hand, throwing the plant cutting he held into the pool. The sound cut off instantly, but light blossomed in the pool, growing from the point where the plant cutting had splashed. The light formed the image of a night sky. The sky seemed idealized, shorn of obscuring clouds, but sprinkled with thousands of tiny points of starlight.

A ray of light shot up from the pool, becoming a wide shaft of light. To Marrec's eyes, the shaft seemed to burn with hope. He reached for it, but just as suddenly, the light winked out, as if extinguished before its time. Marrec felt that the light had been stolen away, but as despair threatened to claim him, a tiny of flicker, a spark, rose up from the pool. It was but a twinkle compared to the beam of before, yet it was a glimmer of hope.

The spark rose from the pool, moving toward the Nentyarch. The tiny firefly light came to rest, hanging just above the brow of the little girl, Ash, like a flashing jewel bound in a queenly circlet.

As the light blazed stronger on her brow, Ash said, "Araluen."

The light flickered out and the scene in the pool died away. Marrec held his breath, looking to the Nentyarch for explanation.

The Nentyarch laughed. He said in a wondering voice, "This is the aspect of good long promised. The Child of Light!"

Wondering whispers broke out in the court. "I don't understand," said Marrec. "This is the Child of Light, sent to the world by Lurue. Lurue long promised a champion of the green, which would

aid us in our long fight against the growing power of the Rotting Man, who is a servant of the evil goddess, Talona, the Lady of Poison. The name of this champion, this Aspect, the true name of the Child of Light, is Araluen. Lurue sent the Child of Light to contest Talona's champion, the Rotting Man, but something has gone very wrong."

Marrec gazed at Ash, if he could still call her that, with open wonder. Was Ash, herself, sent down from Lurue? He asked the Nentyarch, "What's wrong with her? She is no champion; she is a frail child. True, she does have some healing ability, and she defended herself once..."

The Nentyarch said, "This is not the aspect promised, but only a fragment. She is separated from herself, and the Rotting Man holds the answer. I perceive it is his foul necromancy. He has somehow diverted the divine charge of Araluen. It is possible that Lurue's waning power is also connected, though I sense there may be other forces at work, too. Somehow, Lurue is still connected to her lost aspect. As long as the Rotting Man possesses that stolen power, the goddess you know as Lurue may continue to weaken."

"How can that be?"

The Nentyarch thought, then said, "The aspect gains its power directly from Lurue. The theft of the aspect is like a slow leak in a basin of clear water. Until the hole is plugged, the water will diminish. The aspect must be found, restored to herself, and returned to Lurue."

Marrec pulled his spear from his back, an involuntary reaction, and said "Then I must defeat the Rotting Man, to complete my quest, and release Lurue's power back into the

wild."

The Nentyarch considered, then said, "That would be a mighty act and one we would support, but the Rotting Man is a great power, possessing the favor of his evil deity, Talona. You see, the Rotting Man, who I also name the Talontyr, is my enemy, too. He has ousted me from my years-long seat in Dun-Tharos. I shudder to think what evil he has stirred up in that ancient grave I sought to keep under my guard."

Marrec replied, "The Rotting Man must feel vulnerable, somehow. Otherwise, he wouldn't be pursuing little Ash so hard and for so long."

"True enough. Perhaps Ash is the seed required to re-ignite the power of the Child of Light in the world. Lurue's Aspect would be more than a match for the Talontyr, I doubt not."

"I will fight him, and I will win," promised Marrec.

The Nentyarch motioned for Fallon to attend him. He told the elf, "Give Lurue's cleric some history of our enemy."

Fallon nodded, cleared his throat, and began to speak as if reciting a passage from a well-rehearsed tome, "Deep in the heart of the Rawlinswood lies a festering wound, the wreckage of Dun-Tharos, the ancient Nar capital. There the malevolent creature we call the Rotting Man has raised his own dark citadel, marshalling forces of corruption and evil against the surrounding lands. The Rotting Man's handpicked lieutenants and emissaries are the Blightlords. The Blightlords are powerful in their right, and hold the power to warp the creatures of the forest to their sick purposes.

"The Nentyarchs of ages past raised a living fortress of magical trees over the ruins of Dun-Tharos and chased off explorers for centuries. You see, the treasures of Narfell's sinister lords lie in buried storehouses and conjuring chambers beneath the old ruins. Without the Nentyarchs to watch over the old capitol, the Talontyr and his blightspawned servants are free to ransack those treasures

for secrets of evil from which the world has long been spared. The longer the Rotting Man is allowed to remain in the Rawlinswood's heart, the more certain it becomes that he'll unleash a fell power worse even than his own Blightlords." Fallon coughed, his face slightly red, as if in embarrassment, though Marrec didn't see what could be bothering the elf. He had recited the history clearly and without stumbling.

Quiet followed Fallon's speech. The elf's words moved Marrec despite his dislike for Fallon. His heart seemed to be in the right place, despite his sour disposition, but it seemed more clear than ever what he had to do.

Marrec said, "As many of you know, I've only come this far through Lurue's guidance and grace. I believe that Lurue would have me take this girl Ash, this lessened aspect, and reunite her with her greater self, which the Rotting Man must have hidden away. I don't doubt this will be a dangerous journey, outstripping anything I have previously attempted."

"I and my circle will provide support and aid in this venture," said the Nentyarch. "With you will go Elowen, my chief hunter in this matter. Also, Fallon, Anom, and Cirid, all of whom have accomplished deeds of renown without peer."

The three so named, Fallon, Anom, and Cirid, stepped forward. Fallon's habitual frown disappeared in the wake of the Nentyarch's praise. Anom was an elf man dressed all in brown cloth, carrying a staff of dark wood. Cirid, a female human, wore a gown of dark green. Oddly enough, it seemed to Marrec, a great sword in a white sheath was girt at her waist.

"I cannot spare more hunters; the Rotting Man's forces are on the move. Even now, the heart of the Forest of Lethyr is in peril. The Talontyr's reach has grown long indeed. I'll not allow two forests fall to his influence. The Lethyr must not be corrupted."

Marrec nodded.

"But I can spare advice and a route whereby you might sneak into the center of Dun-Tharos itself unseen. In my time there, I learned something of the hidden dungeons beneath the forest. They are dangerous, but better than going openly abroad through territory completely in the Talontyr's hands."

Again the Nentyarch motioned to another of the assembled hunters. That one brought forth a white scroll, newly scribed, and handed it to Elowen.

The Nentyarch explained, "I've marked an entrance to the upperdark passages that extend for miles beneath the Rawlinswood, unknown to most. These forgotten passageways below the forest eventually connect to buried Dun-Tharos itself. From there, you can gain entry to the Rotting Man's center of power by coming up from below. Follow the path marked on the scroll, and you may have a chance."

Elowen unrolled the scroll and studied the map inked upon it. She asked, "Haven't you always warned us away from these buried Nar ruins? Wouldn't we fare better taking an overland route?"

The Nentyarch did something Marrec thought was out of character for such an esteemed and elder elf; he shrugged, saying, "Better to sneak past the slumbering evil of toppled empires than attempt to penetrate the watchful guard of a vigilant malevolence. I call the Rotting Man the Talontyr because his power has waxed with an influx of divine energy sent by his goddess, Talona. All who penetrate too deeply into the Rawlinswood are known to him. The heart of that forest is truly corrupted, and its trees owe their allegiance to him, and me no longer. As his power grows, mine wanes."

Without further comment, Elowen stowed the map.

"We appreciate the help you can offer. With the map, and with the aid of your hunters, we will pierce the Rotting Man's guard and reunite Ash with her greater self."

"I have not finished with my gifts," said the Lord of

Yeshelmaar, who came perilously close to a grin. He clapped. A few of those Marrec had taken for simple Dalesfolk petitioners in the rear of the hall came forward. Each carried a chest, a garment, or some other oddment.

The first walked to stand next to the Nentyarch, who said, "Marrec, your coming was not unlooked for; our dream auguries and moon guides pointed to your arrival, or at least the arrival of someone like you in service to Lurue. That you would come with hope for finding and reviving the Child of Light is more even than we could perceive or hope for. In any event, we have prepared suitable gifts for the one we hoped would come. These gifts will help you in what lies ahead."

The first of the Dalesfolk produced a pair of matched gauntlets. The gauntlets were quite thin and sewn of smooth grain deerskin and lined with white linen. Emerald threads picked out the design of an oak leaf in the palm of each hand.

The Nentyarch said, "Marrec, please accept these enchanted gloves. While you wear them, a strength like that of the oak tree will be yours."

Marrec accepted the gauntlets and bowed low. Mere handling of the gloves was enough for him to feel their vitality. He carefully stowed them at his belt.

Next was produced a leather scabbard on which many elegant designs were inlaid. A hilt of darkly oiled and gleaming wood was visible. The Nentyarch grasped the hilt and pulled forth a long blade. It was a blade unlike any Marrec had before seen; the hilt, crosspiece, and even blade itself were carved from one continuous block of wood. The grain ran with the length of the blade, and like the hilt, the entire weapon shone as if recently polished with wood oil. The Nentyarch took a few hearty swings. The air whistled as it parted before the sharpened edge.

The Nentyarch said, "This is Dymondheart, the blade I carried when I was much younger. You'll find its edge sharper than dead steel; it's hard to dull the edge of a living

weapon. I'd like you to carry-it for me, Elowen. If Dymondheart ends its career buried in the flesh of Rotting Man, I will not be disappointed." He sheathed the wooden blade and presented it to Elowen.

The hunter stammered a thank you, overwhelmed with the magnificence of the gift. She said, "Then .. . count on me to arrange that ending, Nentyarch."

Other gifts were brought forward—three quivers of stiff black cloth inlaid with golden thread. Brighter than the thread were the fletched arrows contained in each—the feathers were mirror-bright gold, flashing and twinkling in the torchlight. The Nentyarch drew out one of the arrows. The shaft was dark, like a line of darkness, even its tip, which narrowed down to an invisible point.

"These arrows are fletched with feathers collected from the phoenix's nest on the highest spire of Yeshelmaar, collected only with her permission. The shafts are carved of lyrwood, harvested in the Shadow Wood of the mystic's dreams. Nothing can evade their flights. Conserve them. Once they are gone, no more can easily be made."

The Nentyarch presented a quiver each to Fallon, Anom, and Cirid. Each was accepted gracefully, though Marrec was sure he saw Fallon cast a quick, envious glance at the new sword gracing Elowen's hip.

From his lips, Fallon was all poise and polish, saying, "We thank you, Nentyarch, for our gifts. They will be a great help against the Talontyr's forces."

"Now, let me think. I did not have anything prepared for the southern wayfarer, Gunggari; our presentiments were not so accurate."

The Oslander shrugged. He said, "I need no gifts."

"Gifts are not for those who need, but those who appreciate," responded the Nentyarch. "Elowen has told me something of your abilities. I believe I have just the thing, a gift anyone might find useful."

A Dalesman brought forward an open chest. The Nentyarch

pulled out a plain leather haversack. Opening it, he revealed several small vials, each filled with an iridescent liquid: purple, sky blue, forest green, and shimmering yellow. Each vial was held in place with a cunning leather strap so that all were side by side and easily accessible when the haversack flap was open.

"Each of these vials is filled with an elixir of potent magic. When you have need, unstop a vial and drink. The contents of each vial are displayed by each little figure stitched into the leather of the haversack. When you have used up all the vials, return the haversack to me, and I shall refill them."

Gunggari accepted the haversack of potions. He scanned the labels, reading aloud, "Heroic Surge, Bead of Flame, Strength of the Bull... truly you do me a great honor, Nentyarch. I will use these in thankfulness."

"And last, Ash."

All eyes turned to the girl. Ash stood, unconcerned and apparently uncaring of the heritage the Nentyarch claimed for her.

"What gifts will avail you, eh, little one?" asked the Nentyarch. "What about this, then?"

A final chest was brought forward. The Nentyarch produced a set of leather straps, chased with green thread, fitted with a bit and reins. It was a bridle, meant to be fitted to a horse's head.

"This is not exactly for you, Ash, but for your mount, Henri. Wearing this, he shall always know his way, and even should he stray in dark places, he will always be able to bear you back here to me and to safety."

Ash made no move, nor did anyone expect a reaction. Marrec accepted the bridle, thanking the Nentyarch for his thoughtfulness.

"Wait, I'm going, too," yelled Ususi. "If the Rotting Man threatens Lethyr, then he threatens the Mucklestones. I can't have that. I will help you end his threat, if I can."

"I wondered," smiled the Nentyarch. "I suppose we can't let

you go without a gift of your own to aid you in this fight. Let me think... ah yes, I have the perfect thing."

He gestured to the hunter who still held the chest containing the Keystone. Ususi's eyes widened. The Lord of Yeshelmaar opened the chest, retrieved the Keystone once more and bestowed it on Ususi. The glowing stone lit up her face like the light of the sun reflected off water.

The Nentyarch said, "The Keystone needs a keeper. I know of no one more knowledgeable about those mystic stones. I charge you with the protection of the stones and with the keeping of the Keystone. Use their power well, Ususi Keywarden."

Ususi swallowed, then simply nodded her head. Marrec enjoyed seeing the mage at a loss for words. Ususi solemnly placed the Keystone back into the chest. She finally said, "I am grateful." A thought struck Marrec then.

"Nentyarch," said Marrec, "with the Keystone, perhaps we may shortcut the ruined passages below the Rawlinswood entirely?"

The elder elf looked to the mage. Ususi considered and said, "That may be. We can perhaps pick up the path through the Celestial Nadir where we left it yesterday. I left the exit open. I might be able to forge a detour into the center of Dun-Tharos instead of back to the Mucklestones themselves."

The Nentyarch added, "If you choose such a route, be careful. My dreams hint that the Rotting Man influences all realms contingent and coexistent with his own. It could be that you'll find defenses even in your ancient space."

Ususi looked doubtful and said nothing. Marrec said, "We will take counsel and decide our path by this afternoon."

"Then the Court is concluded," intoned the Nentyarch.

The Lord of Yeshelmaar called a feast in honor of the heroes who were resolved to find and face the Talontyr. As usual during such affairs, Elowen ate sparingly.

Afterwards, Elowen, Gunggari, Marrec, Ususi, and the other three hunters whom the Nentyarch selected to aid in the

endeavor agreed to meet. Plans had to be laid in such a mighty undertaking. They chose a garden high on the side of Yeshelmaar, called Skymeadow, which Fallon suggested for its ideal lighting.

Elowen reached the garden first. Of all the hanging gardens in Yeshelmaar, Skymeadow was by far her favorite, so she was surprised Fallon would suggest it. In her experience, the hunter always went out of his way to annoy her. She decided not to waste her early arrival in contemplation of Fallon's bitter nature.

She selected a cleared circular space of reddish flagstones, surrounded by low benches. A clump of leafy fruit trees overhung the patio, providing shade from the sun's direct glare. Papyrus stems and various flowering mints ran rampant outside the circumference of the patio, save for the occasional lone fruit tree. Beyond she could see a landscaped pool, complete with a cool grotto, like a cave, actually carved into the rock of Yeshelmaar. She could discern a bronze statue of Corellon Larethian deep in the shadows of the grotto.

Who was she kidding?

She pulled out the Nentyarch's gift, unstrapping the scabbard of Dymondheart from her belt and laying the weapon reverently before her on the stone bench. Though the scabbard was beautiful, her eyes were drawn to the grain of the wood hilt. She ran her hands along the hilt, then grasped it. She expected it to be slippery, but instead the grip was solid, warm, almost welcoming. She pulled the length of the blade free of the scabbard.

Shafts of sunlight penetrated the tree cover to strike and scatter off the length of the blade, almost as if it were metal in truth. The vitality of the living blade in her hand was astounding; she could feel the life force contained within, almost as if she gripped not the hilt of a sword but a branch of a mighty redwood.

She heard the sound of someone on the stone stair and

quickly sheathed Dymondheart, grinning.

Ususi appeared, followed by Gunggari. Gunggari carried the leather satchel given him by the Nentyarch, but Ususi did not have the Keystone with her. Still smiling, Elowen strapped Dymondheart's scabbard to her belt.

"Have you seen Marrec?" asked Gunggari.

She shook her head.

Ususi responded, "When I saw him after the feast, he was talking to Fallon."

Elowen heard quick steps on the stair. "Speak, and you are answered," she said, as Marrec popped into view.

"Where's Fallon?" he said, quickly scanning the garden. The frown indicated he wasn't happy with what he found.

"Not here yet," said Elowen. "Why?"

"He said that the Nentyarch wanted some time alone with Ash. I figured it would be all right... but I've got a sudden feeling that I shouldn't have left her."

"Marrec, I see him," said Gunggari, "and Ash. Down there, along the road..."

Gunggari, beyond the shade offered by the flagged patio, shaded his eyes with one hand while pointing over the side of the garden.

"Oh no," mouthed Marrec.

Elowen saw Fallon, made tiny by distance, holding a brilliantly glowing object over his head. Behind him he led Henri the pony, complete with its new bridle. Ash calmly rode Henri.

"He's taking Ash," yelled Marrec.

At the same time Ususi screamed, "He's taking my Keystone, that bastard! 'The Nentyarch wishes to gaze upon its luster one more time...' I'll show him luster he won't soon forget!"

Marrec dashed back down the stairs, Gunggari on his tail. Elowen knew they were too late. Already Fallon had used the Keystone to enter the exit that Ususi had left open. The darkness of the Celestial Nadir spilled out of the square opening, its strange properties evident even from the

distance.

"Come on!" yelled Ususi.

She charged the side of the garden. Elowen tried get out of her way but was taken off guard. The mage didn't change her path; she merely opened her arms wide and dashed herself against Elowen. The force of the impact threw both women off the top of high Yeshelmaar.

A scream escaped Elowen as the air roared in her ears. The sculpted sides of Yeshelmar blurred past, while the ground below expanded with alarming rapidity. Ususi

maintained her grip on the hunter, and she uttered an arcane syllable, which reverberated in Elowen's mind. Before she quite knew what was happening, she and Ususi alit on the hard cobblestone road before Yeshelmaar as easy as birds after a flight.

Ususi released her hold on the elf and began running with all the speed she could muster toward the portal, which was already graying out. Fallon and Ash had gone through. Elowen took a deep breath. No time for hysterics. She could kill Ususi later.

Elowen sprinted toward the dissipating portal, quickly passing the slower moving mage. As she moved ahead, Ususi gasped out "Block it. If you stand in the opening, it can not close."

Elowen willed herself to go faster. Almost... almost... but the portal was hardly even visible anymore, only a slight haze in the air. Without stopping, she willed a last desperate burst of speed and threw herself into the haze.

Darkness enveloped her.

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He'd reached the last flight of stairs. Marrec screamed again, "Make way! Fallon has kidnapped Ash. Get out of my way, damn your eyes."

He was winded, but running full speed down stairs was far easier than running up. His shoulders were bruised from a few occasions where he'd miscalculated the distance to the

landing, only to be brought up short by the wall. He could hear Gunggari still pounding down behind him

Finally he reached the main level. Yeshelmaar functionaries tried to get out of his way, and one had the presence of mind to work the gate mechanism, heeding his call from higher up, so that it gaped open by the time he and Gunggari reached it.

He saw the portal, a square of night intruding on the bright day. Only a hundred yards, he could make that easy.

As he raced closer, he saw that something lay half within the portal. Closer still, and he saw that it was Ususi—the mage was stretched out across the hard ground, her lower half lit by the sun, her upper half thrust into the darkness. She was slowly being dragged forward.

Reaching her side, he saw that she was sprawled through the portal, lying half across that stone path he had come to dread on his last trip through the Nadir. Elowen dangled in Ususi's grip, her face white with strain, hanging over the void.

"Help me, you idiot," barked the mage, as Elowen's weight dragged her forward another inch.

He reached down, grabbed Elowen's free hand and pulled. The elf was as light as a feather. No, it was the gloves given him by the Nentyarch—his muscles were magnified to nearly twice their normal strength. Despite everything, he smiled as he set Elowen down safely in the center of the stone path. Gunggari appeared in the door of the portal, the expression of concern on his face fading when his eyes found Elowen. He bent and helped up the mage, who was muttering and complaining under her breath.

Marrec looked down the path, into darkness. He sought any tell-tale sign of light. Fallon and Ash couldn't be that far ahead... but all was dark, without any light to betray that the path was occupied by his quarry.

"Where are they, Ususi?" he asked.

"They're out there, don't worry," replied Ususi, "but time

may pass differently at the Celestial Nadir's edges than it does in the Nadir's deep. Though we saw them pass here but minutes ago, they may already be several hours ahead of us..."

"Then we must go now."

Gunggari said in a quiet voice, "I'm ready. I have my gear."

Still slightly out of breath from her near fall, Elowen said, "Fallon must be a spy for the Rotting Man or one of the blightlords. He is probably taking Ash directly to his paymaster. If we follow this path, we will find him. There are no side passages on the path, right Ususi?"

"Correct" said wizard, "but I am not ready to go—there are supplies I must get..."

"Then you can follow later. I must go after Ash," interrupted Marrec.

So saying, Marrec strode down the path. Gunggari followed. Elowen gave Ususi a small shrug and said, "The matter is decided. I'll see you later, when we return."

"Smoke and Fire!" screamed Ususi, frustrated. "That traitor has the Keystone. I won't let him keep it. I'm coming."

Still in earshot, Marrec paused until Elowen and Ususi joined him. Behind them, the daylight grayed out and became black. Utter night encompassed them all. Points of light from distant motes of matter dotting the Celestial Nadir twinkled into visibility.

Ususi's voice pierced the black, "We forgot to block the gate open."

Marrec heard her utter a few arcane syllables. A light dazzled his eyes. Ususi had called magical illumination. Before Lurue's silence, he had been able to do the same.

"Just like last time we braved the Nadir," said Ususi, "the only way out is through. Let us hope the exit is not contested by the Rotting Man."

"If he squats at the end of this path," said Elowen, "our task will prove all the easier. We won't have to track him down."

Gunggari chuckled.

"Follow me," urged Marrec, turning to continue down the path.

They hurried along the stone lane, suspended without strut or structure over the void. On their last trip through that path behind the world, Marrec had led several mounts. That meant moving cautiously down the stone path. He wasn't so constrained any longer. None of them had mounts. The weight of his armor kept him from a run, even with the extra strength he felt trickling into his blood from the Nentyarch's gloves, but they moved nearly twice as fast as they had before.

He tried to keep his eyes on the course ahead, scanning for any evidence of Ash's passage and that of her kidnapper, Fallon. It wasn't too long before such evidence appeared along the path, illuminated by Ususi's light. Henri was a horse, after all, and his spoor was enough to raise Marrec's spirits immediately.

"Watch your step," he called to his friends behind.

After glancing at the droppings, Gunggari stated, "They are no more than thirty minutes ahead of us, if that."

Marrec nodded and they were off again. When he got his hands on Fallon... Well, he hoped that he would have the luxury of just tossing the elf into the surrounding void. Of course, running the traitor through with Justlance wouldn't be out of the question, just so long as Ash was safe. Lurue's legacy had been entrusted him, and he'd squandered that trust. He tried not to think about it. He'd get her back. Failing was not an option.

"What's that smell?" inquired Elowen from behind.

He paused and sniffed. He caught the barest tang of salt, like the sea, but the briny smell was not alone. Mixed with it was a smell of corruption, like spoiled fish.

"More relics come to haunt us?" asked Marrec, looking back to catch Ususi's eye.

"Perhaps," she answered, uncertain.

The advancing light brought into view a branch in the path.

The main stone lane they had followed for so long appeared to continue on straight into the darkness, but a narrower way gave off to the left. Rather than stone, it appeared to be organic, not unlike a huge exposed root.

The tips of the root were entangled with the stone lane, piercing and growing through it, while the thicker portion of the root angled out and slightly up, leading toward to some unseen larger stem. The stone bridge was stained a dirty green, as the root itself seemed to ooze flaccid sap. It was also the source of the smell, which had become strong enough to wrinkle Marrec's nose.

Gunggari moved to the edge of the root, kneeled, and ran his fingers lightly over the surface of the stone and root. Bringing his fingers up, slightly stained with dark green, he sniffed.

He said, "They took this side way."

"They walked on that thing?" asked Marrec.

"It may have been grown expressly for that purpose," said Ususi. "Having held the Keystone, even for short a time, I have gained a slight sensitivity to the paths that pierce this place. This 'root' is not part of the system, yet Fallon, with the help of the Keystone, has allowed an outside influence into the Nadir, a powerful influence. This 'root path' may only be temporary. If we want to find Fallon, we should take it before it disengages."

Marrec steeled himself, then carefully set a foot out on the root. He expected it to be slippery but was surprised when the green ooze caught and held his foot in place. However, when he removed his foot, the ooze gave up its grasp without complaint.

He said, "The path seems to be ensorcelled to prevent slipping."

He stepped back out and moved a little way along the root, avoiding looking down; it really was noticeably narrower than the stone path had been. The root path had a slight but noticeable slope upward. The others tentatively moved out

onto the root after him. Because the root was more round than flat, there was only room for them to travel single file.

Before he commenced walking along the sticky conduit, he pulled Justlance out. He felt better immediately.

And so they continued along the strange green path. The smell worsened.

After less than a minute, the stone lane bridging the void was no longer visible behind them. Marrec hoped they weren't making a stupid error. What if the root was pulled away? He tried to quicken his pace.

"The smell... it's familiar. I just placed it," said Elowen. "I smelled the same thing when we faced Gameliel in the glade of the Mucklestones."

Marrec nodded, but he realized Elowen might not be able to see him. He said, "I thought the same. My hope is that we are gaining, and that whoever is aiding Fallon's passage doesn't know we are following behind."

A mumbling voice spoke from ahead of him, "We know now." Earthy giggling broke out. A concentration of ooze at the edge of the light shifted, and Marrec saw that it was actually a creature; a loathsome, miniature human composed of muck and filth. The smell worsened, as slime oozed from the creature's form and it giggled and chortled.

Marrec hefted his spear into throwing position and said, "Name yourself, creature."

The giggling eased, and the muck man eyed Marrec with muddy orbs. He seemed about to speak, but instead of answer, he spewed a gob of muddy liquid. With uncanny accuracy, the filth splattered across Marrec's face. It burned. He could still see enough to cast his readied weapon. Justlance buried itself in the creature's stomach. The creature squealed and burbled, like a man yelling up from underwater. The spear had pinned it to the root. But in a feat that must have proved extremely painful, it pulled itself free, losing a significant portion of its oozing body. It screamed, and if possible, the stench worsened, but it wasn't dead.

Translucent wings of ooze unfurled from its back as it flowed like bead of water across the top of the root, then dripped off into the darkness. Gone ... but Marrec could hear heavy wings flapping down in the darkness and a final giggle.

Justlance slapped back into his hand magically clean of all defilement. Marrec used his other hand to wipe away the stinging mud from his eyes.

He said, "Surprise is no longer our ally."

Gunggari, who was bringing up the rear, said, "A winged foe in this open space is trouble."

"Let's hope my spear in its belly will make it think twice about returning."

As they hurried up the root, the diameter of the path gradually widened. The glimmer of a greenish illumination grew steadily closer as they walked. "Be ready," warned Marrec. "Our path is leading us to that light."

The light's intensity grew as they approached. Their path revealed itself to be the long, slender shoot of an earthy mass of mud and ooze which hung in the void. Like a pustule, the mass had forced itself through a self-made breach in the dark void—brilliant light streamed through a small gap in space; it was the reflection off the mass itself that gave the light a greenish cast.

Ususi said, "It's another portal—but it is a breach, aided by the Keystone's power. I'll see Fallon's head in a pot for this defilement."

The mass was not static—it slowly heaved and bulged as if its surface were boiling in slow motion, and creatures inhabited the island. The muck man Marrec had earlier stabbed stood waist deep in a pool of ooze. The portion of his flesh lost in breaking loose from Marrec's spear was healed with seepage from the island mass. Two more muck men slouched near the light-limned portal. The stench had returned, with a vengeance. Marrec thought they looked like vicious dwarfs dipped in oil and sewage, with wings.

"What's all the gook those things are standing on?" wondered Marrec.

"A manifestation of the Talontyr's power over rot and decay," said Elowen.

"It doesn't take Talona's Consort for such a trifle," slobbered the creature lounging in the slime pool, refuting Elowen's statement. "It was Anammelech who plucked the Child of Light from this forgotten demiplane easily enough. My siblings and I are but extensions of Anammelech's will. He wants you dead, so our task remains undone."

The three creatures took to the dark air, swooping toward Marrec.

"That's just great," muttered Marrec. He called behind him, "Anammelech, I recognize that name for a reason, right?"

The first creature was upon him before he got an answer. Two claws raked at his stomach, but his armor saved him. The force of the creature's attack might have pushed him over the side of the root, but the root's sticky nature held Marrec fast. He felt a tiny surge of satisfaction in realizing that "Anammelech" had miscalculated the utility of his root. Despite his excellent footing, he was still splattered in slime in the wake of the creature's passage, and the stink assailed his nostrils.

The second creature flew wide past him; he wasn't its target. The third, the one he had struck before, bore down on him with vengeance in its muddy heart.

"Ware my reach, creature of dust, or I'll do more than stick you this time. Flee or perish," promised Marrec.

"Stick this," said the slime man, as it cocked back its hand as if holding something.

A green glow emanated from its palm. Its arm came around and it released. A glowing green viscous glob sailed at Marrec. The cleric tried to sidestep, but the throw caught him on the left leg.

He knew pain then. He'd expected the glob to be something akin to the spittle it'd caught him with earlier, but the

glowing glob was acid. It was eating away at his clothing and his skin. It was pain.

But pain was something a warrior expected and could overcome. He charged his tormenter, running up the slender root and onto the slowly-roiling surface of the island. The creature could not evade him. With all the power of his enhanced strength and Justlance's enchanted fervor, he struck at his tormentor and pierced its head. It tried to scream around the shaft of his spear, but only for a moment. A second later it decomposed into slumping ooze, completely devoid of life.

He whirled, trying to see his friends who were still strung out along the length of the root. At the same time, he grabbed up a double handful of the island's muck and began to scrub at the burning spot on his leg. He had to neutralize the acid. One of the creatures hovered just beyond Elowen, who had drawn Dymondheart. It threw an acid glob at the elf similar to the one Marrec was attempting to scrub away, but in a feat of amazing swiftness, Elowen deflected the glob away from her and into the void with the flat of her blade. Dymondheart was a potent weapon indeed. Marrec understood why she hadn't pulled out her longbow to strike the creature at a distance.

Behind Elowen, Ususi stood incanting, while Gunggari beat away the advances of the last ooze creature who was attempting to dart in and claw Ususi's face. Gunggari clipped the creature once with his dizheri, sending it into a shallow spiral, but it recovered.

Ususi finished incanting and commanded, "Slumber take you."

The command had no effect on either of the remaining creatures. They didn't even flinch.

"They're not really alive, only animate," yelled the mage.

The creatures tittered but redoubled their efforts. One gurgled, "We will have more claim to life than you, when we've completed the task Anammelech set for us."

Marrec cursed, ceased scrubbing at the acid on his leg, and cast Justlance. He winged his target, which squealed and dropped away. Moments later, the damage to its wing oozed closed, and it flapped back up, still too afraid of Dymondheart to close with Elowen. Justlance fell out of sight.

Gunggari reached into the haversack and pulled out one of the vials, glinting with red highlights. He hurled it at the creature bedeviling Ususi. The creature evaded, but as the vial flew past, it exploded in flame. The wave front of fire expanded, encompassing the frantically flapping mud creature in an instant, before burning itself out. All that remained of the flame was smoke, and all that remained of the animate ooze was a crumbling form of flash-dried earth, which fell quickly into the unlit silence of the Nadir.

Gunggari said, "I wondered what the 'Bead of Flame' might accomplish. Good thing that I did not drink it!" The Oslander grinned at his witticism.

The remaining visible creature, which continued to evade Elowen's reach, reconsidered its chances. Breaking off, it made a beeline for the glowing exit.

"Don't let it get away," yelled Marrec. He wondered what had become of his spear, it wasn't like the enchanted shaft to take so long to come back "Return, Justlance!" he yelled in frustration.

Elowen drove Dymondheart point first into the root-path with one hand while her other hand simultaneously pulled out her longbow. Problem was, she didn't have it strung, though she made a valiant effort to quickly pull it

Ususi flipped the latch on the bright yellow wand pouch she wore on her belt, quick-drawing a slender glass rod, also yellow, but translucent.

A sizzle of magic leaped from the wand's tip, closing the gap between Ususi and the creature in an instant, but the bolt continued past the creature—who had not been its true target—and impacted the portal. A slab of crystal force

sprang up, completely blocking the doorway. The daylight beyond continued to stream through but filtered by the translucent wall to a brilliant gold.

The fleeing creature managed to avoid dashing itself against the newly created wall. It squealed in rage, but instead of turning to face its foes, it winged off into the darkness, snarling threats all the while.

Ususi sheathed her wand in satisfaction. She said, "The Wand of Citrine Force is nearly spent. I like to conserve it ... but I did not want that beast warning its master that we were so close."

Marrec had privately speculated about that wand pouch. He said, "You may have saved us a nasty greeting on the other side. Good thinking."

Ususi smiled, and Marrec found himself smiling back. She had a good smile, when she chose to flash it.

Justlance sparkled out of emptiness, falling into Marrec's grasp. "Finally," he murmured.

"Everyone ok?" wondered Gunggari.

When no one spoke up immediately, Marrec said, "Good. Surprise is hopefully our friend still. Ususi, dismiss your blockade. Fallon can't be far, and poor Ash with him."

As Elowen finished stringing her bow, Ususi walked across the oozing surface to the blocked portal. She touched the tip of her wand to it and looked at Marrec. "Ready?" she asked.

Marrec took up a position directly in front of the door. Gunggari was right behind him, and Elowen was off to the side, an arrow strung. He nodded.

Ususi pulled the wand away from the crystal surface. The wall wavered and was gone, as if it had never truly existed. Beyond, Marrec saw the edges of a great forest.

Behind, Elowen said, "It's the Rawlinswood. Looks like Fallon couldn't penetrate to its heart in Dun Tharos. We're lucky."

Marrec studied the scene carefully. Nothing moved, save branches idly swaying in a breeze. No sound penetrated the portal's mouth. A great arch of weathered and vine-

encrusted stone was visible at the forest's edge, standing like a great gate. Further in, he thought he spied another. Marrec estimated that the mouth of the portal was not more than twenty feet from the first arch.

"What're those?" he asked Elowen.

"Those' are the reason I know where we are; I recognize them. They are called the Arches of Xenosi. Sounds scary, but they're just another ruin claimed by the Rawlinswood."

"Fallon's gone that way," said Gunggari. "By the look of it, he's moving quickly."

He pointed to the ground immediately in front of the portal. The unmistakable prints of small hooves angled toward the first arch.

"He'll never know what hit him," promised Marrec. "Let's go." They stepped through the portal mouth directly into the mouth of a savage ambush.

CHAPTER 15

ashing branches behind the portal, poised out of sight, fell on them as they exited the Nadir. Marrec was knocked over and rolled through the dirt. Pain lanced his side. His vision was filled with violently swaying tree limbs, leafless and gnarled, like a forest seen too close in a thunderstorm. He couldn't see his friends. The cleric tried to stand, but a large branch smashed him face down onto the ground.

He heard Elowen calling to her blade Dymondheart and the sound of Ususi chanting, closer, behind him, maybe. Another effort saw him to his feet.

Constructions of leafless, interlocking branches, each forming a sinister humanoid shape, surrounded them. Faceless, their empty visages inspired terror all the more. The sound of their combined movement was horrible to hear: a rush of creaks, the dry saw of wood on wood, and a low roar like wind in the trees. Some were only three feet high, but others topped ten. One of these large ones again menaced Marrec, but he dodged the massive arm as it again tried to smash him flat.

An eruption of flame to his left and behind caused many of the creatures to flinch. He heard Ususi's voice

"You twigblights don't like that, do you? Just wait, I have more."

Amidst the rushing, thrashing branches, he saw the mage.

Ususi stood in a self-created circular clearing littered with burning twigs and branches. The creatures outside the periphery seemed more interested in staying away from Ususi than closing on her. The portal mouth at Ususi's back, from which he'd exited, was still visible as a dark void in the air. More of the creatures shuffled forward from behind the portal, skirting its edge. They had lain in wait, that was obvious. So much for his theory about their arrival being unmarked.

A knot of activity to his right and closer to the first arch drew his eye—he could see the gleam of Dymondheart as it rose above the branch tops of their attackers. Elowen was there, but where was Gunggari?

Deciding his friend could take care of himself, he rushed toward Ususi. Her magic was impressive, but his experience taught him that impressive magic often came at the price of a fragile body. Apparently, one of the large monsters had the same thought. Just as Marrec was about to reach Ususi's side, a branch crashed down on the mage's head. The woman fell like a puppet with severed strings.

"Ususi!" he screamed.

Justlance finally in hand, he drove its spear point into the dark heartwood of the creature, using all the strength granted him by his gloves—it felt as if he could draw more or less strength as he needed. He realized at the same time that the reservoir of might offered by

the Nentyarch's gift was not without limit. He used up a great quantity of that strength with that thrust. The twigblight, as Ususi had called it, groaned like a live thing, its branches flailing randomly as it was felled. When it struck the ground, it shattered into hundreds of smaller unmoving

pieces. Where its heart would have been were it a living creature, a double-handful of stinking mud burst and oozed. Marrec was reminded of the ooze creatures they'd faced within the Nadir. He realized that his strike for the "heart" of the monster had been a lucky strike indeed. He doubted his spear would have the same lethal effect on these creatures if he didn't pierce the 'heartwood.'

The still-burning splinters of the creatures Ususi had blasted seemed a deterrent to the other, smaller stick monstrosities. He stood, and Ususi lay, at the center of that safe zone. The dark portal to the Nadir remained open, only a step away, held open by the solidified mass of mud and ooze that made up the island on the opposite side. He considered pulling Ususi back through to get her out of harm's way. That would mean leaving Gunggari and Elowen to their fate, something Marrec could not bring himself to do.

The creatures were retreating from him and his fallen comrade. They were concentrating their numbers where he guessed Elowen, and he hoped Gunggari, were standing.

The sound of Gunggari's dizheri blared forth. Marrec grinned. The tattooed warrior was still up and around.

The twigblights surged forward, redoubling their efforts to win into the center of the knot of activity where Dymondheart flailed and the dizheri played. Without the press of monsters battering him, Marrec was better able to see the focus of their attention. Finally, he caught glimpses of Elowen and Gunggari together, fighting back-to-back. They were fighting furiously and would need a respite soon, but he couldn't leave Ususi alone.

When chance gave him another glimpse of Gunggari through the thrashing limbs, Marrec cupped his hands and yelled at the top of his lungs, "Flee into the arches— you're too vulnerable out here."

Gunggari darted his gaze toward Marrec. He nodded. Seconds later Marrec's line of sight was again obscured, but the concentration of creatures surged forward under the first

stone arch of Xenosi. The arches were too narrow for the whole mass of attackers. The twilighters were unable to maintain the ferocity of their assault, and those on the sides were forced to peel away. A great creaking crackled and popped through the air. Marrec wondered if the creatures were concerned that their quarry would escape or frustrated that their plan to ambush and overwhelm had failed.

Not all the creatures followed after Elowen and Gungari. A handful turned back toward him, one almost as large as the creature he'd earlier vanquished with a thrust of Justlance.

He'd been saving one last spell of healing, holding onto it for a desperate situation. The current situation qualified, he decided. Without Ususi's aid, he doubted his spear alone would see him through the conflict. That's when the temptation thrust up from his subconscious, like a bubble of poisonous gas seeping to a swamp surface. He could call on his heritage; he could use his talent. He could end the threat then and there.

"No," he uttered out loud.

It was too much. He'd sworn to himself....

Thrusting the thought from his mind, he bent and recited the spell of healing on the fallen mage. With Ususi's magical arsenal at hand, there would be no reason to bring his talent into it, but the temptation, awake once more, settled into the back of his mind, waiting.

Ususi groaned, her eyes fluttering, when the bluish gleam of his healing magic faded from her skin.

"Up and at 'em," Marrec cajoled. "We're about to have company. Why don't you show them the hot end of a fire blast?"

Ususi mumbled something, then took Marrec's proffered hand. He helped her to stand, but her grip was weak and shaking. His healing spell had brought her to consciousness, but he realized the woman was still hurt.

Her eyes widened, and she pointed behind.

Marrec whirled in time to see the last ooze man fly from the

still-open portal mouth, its flapping wings spattering droplets of muck. When it saw Ususi and Marrec, it crowed in delight then croaked, "Anammelech is coming! Anammelech is coming!"

The twigblights, their courage restored by Ususi's weakness, pressed them from the other side. They were only twenty or thirty feet away and moving closer with a determined step, if constructs of dead tree branches can be determined.

"Ususi, take them," Marrec whispered.

He grabbed up his spear once more, and cast it at the screaming muckman. The shaft flew wide, missing the darting, yelling creature by inches.

Ususi steadied herself and began speaking. Her low tones climbed in octave, and with a rush she managed to force several sounds out of her mouth simultaneously. A wave of red flame was born from the path of her waving hand. The semicircle of fire grew in height and width and rushed away from her toward the returning twigblights. The fiery front broke over the creatures like a true wave. Marrec could feel the heat even from where he stood, as five of the creatures caught fire immediately, sending streams of oily smoke into the sky. The crackle and snap of burning twigblight was loud. The remaining three creatures danced away, apparently in full retreat.

"Way to go, Ususi," he congratulated the mage. She graced him with another of her rare smiles.

The muckman continued its disturbing chant about the imminent arrival of Anammelech. It opened the distance between itself and Marrec, wary of Justlance's sudden return to Marrec's grasp.

Without warning, the creature exploded.

Ooze and odiferous mud splattered Marrec and Ususi. All that remained of the muck creature was a crater-like circle, its circumference formed by its remains.

"Well... that was convenient," opined Marrec after a few seconds of examination.

Ususi studied muck crater, concentration wrinkling her brow. She said, "That was no accident."

"You think it blew itself up on purpose?"

She responded, "The master calling home his familiar, perhaps."

"Messy way to say, 'here, boy,' don't you think?"

Ususi sighed, "Do you make a joke of everything?"

"Only when I've just escaped death by a nail's breadth," confided Marrec, grinning.

"You know, I have noticed you don't always joke.

"Hmm?" Marrec raised an eyebrow.

"Most of the time you speak simply, even like a commoner, but every so often your speech lapses into a series of formal proclamations, like 'Flee or perish!' or 'Now you shall meet the cruel end of Justlance!' It is ... interesting," finished the mage.

Marrec opened his mouth to respond, but Ususi spoke up again, saying, "It is a habit I've been studying. It is my theory that you slip into that manner of talking when you think people around need the encouragement of a self-assured voice. Or you yourself need it. Anyway, it is a theory."

Marrec's felt his face warm. Ususi looked at him with one raised eyebrow, as if she expected him to cork off with a sample proclamation.

A gurgle and sucking sound drew their gazes back to the circular crater of ooze. The ooze was drawing back together.

Marrec said, "He's returning, be ready." He was almost grateful the creature was back—it relieved him of having to comment on Ususi's theory. He readied his spear.

Yet another blanket of stench erupted from the coagulating ooze. As it slumped back together, it seemed to grow in quantity. Soon there was no question that the ooze was somehow replenishing itself, growing larger and taller than the muck man had been. A half-formed arm reached forward, palm out. Marrec's stomach twisted as he recognized a sort

of dark mirror of himself summoning Justlance. In the half-formed creature's hand a slender, weapon-shaped object blackened the air. Both he and Ususi recognized the weapon immediately. It was twin to the halberd wielded by fallen Gameliel.

Ususi whispered, "A blightlord comes. I am too tired to fight."

"You were right about the ooze creature, almost. It called its master, not the other way around. It must be Anammelech." He grabbed Ususi's hand and they dashed toward the empty mouth of the Arches of Xenosi. "Let's try to catch up with Gunggari and Elowen."

Marrec glanced back as they passed from the sun into the tree-lined corridor framed by the arches. The blightlord was almost fully formed and already sliding forward on a layer of slime like an upright, armored slug. Then they were fully committed to the cool green hall under the trees, running over light-stippled earth.

He was surprised to discover that he couldn't see very far at all along the length of the passage. Some sort of viridian mist greened out vision beyond more than forty or fifty feet, if that. As it happened, that was about the distance between each successive stone arch. Though the lane was strangely clear of growth, the forest pressed in on all sides, and vines grew thickly on the sides of each arch, and some few hung down beneath each stone span.

Like light, sound was also muffled in the lane, though he thought he could hear the sound of conflict far ahead. If Gunggari's tracking skill could be trusted, Ash and her kidnapper were also ahead. He tightened his grip slightly on Ususi's hand and tried to speed up.

Ususi's injuries came to the fore. A stitch in her breath soon became a gasp, and she stumbled. She said something in a language Marrec couldn't understand. He was pretty sure it was a language he'd never heard before.

"What?" he asked, slowing a trifle.

"I can not keep this pace. My foresight has failed me. I know just the spell to speed me along, but I do not have it prepared."

Marrec frowned but decided not to remind Ususi of his current diminished state of being unable to prepare any spells at all. It would only come across sounding petty.

Instead he said, "They are just a bit ahead of us. Just a little bit farther. I'd rather Anammelech catch up with us only after we've caught up with Gunny and Elowen."

She nodded, conserving her breath.

They penetrated further into the Rawlinswood. The light dimmed slightly, but otherwise the trees, undergrowth, and other foliage to either side of the corridor remained fairly uniform. By that time their forward progress had slowed to a fast walk. The sounds of fighting ahead died away, perhaps because of intervening distance.

To keep his mind off their slow pace, he asked, "Why'd you call those creatures twigblights?"

Ususi shrugged. She said, "It seemed appropriate."

The unicorn warrior smiled and gave her hand a squeeze. "Indeed."

Recognition of the true nature of the 'dead tree' standing just outside the arch-defined corridor came a heartbeat too late, as it stumble-rushed forward on its tree trunk legs, blocking their path.

Ususi cursed, again in a language unknown to Marrec. No, she wasn't cursing; she was uttering syllables of a spell. Marrec released her hand and reached for his spear. Just in time; her hands began to spark with the imminent release of power.

The twigblight rushed them. It was so big that it had to duck to fit beneath the stone arch under which they'd stopped. He rolled left, Ususi rolled right; the creature charged past. One of its twig-claw hands scraped along Marrec's armor but failed to find an opening.

Marrec drove his spear into the creature's back, trying to

find the 'sweet spot' he'd discovered on the other creature outside the forest. It deflected his thrust with a weighty claw of gnarled wood.

Ususi's spell generated an arc of electric blue light that crackled along the creature's body, sending it into flailing convulsions. The smell of burning wood and ozone mixed, and a trail of smoke rose to mingle with the greenish mist.

Partially stunned, the twigblight shuddered and stepped back. Marrec was ready. That time the creature wasn't able to bring up its wooden limbs quickly enough to defend its heart. The tip of his spear punched through the woody shell and found something soft, yielding, and odiferous. It shuddered again, then ceased all movement. Robbed of animation, the creature resembled nothing so much as an old, rotting tree with vividly posed branches.

"Impressive," whispered a voice from behind.

Marrec groaned with sick anticipation as he whirled to face the speaker. A dark silhouette, hazy and indistinct in the green distance, gained clarity and sharpness of outline as it glided smoothly forward along the ground. Anammelech had caught them.

The blightlord's armor was either covered with or formed of hardened ooze. The plates were mobile, softening, shifting, and flowing over and across each other in a mesmerizing crawl. Anammelech's head was bare, and the crawling plates of his armor never rose above his neckline. His face was filthy and his eye sockets twin voids but for a wet sparkle far back in each empty orbit. In one hand he gripped a halberd-shaped hole in the air, just like Gameliel's.

The blightlord continued to slide forward without flexing his legs to stride like a mortal. Marrec saw a glistening slime trail in Anammelech's wake. He was reminded of a snail's trail.

The blightlord slid to within just a few feet of Marrec and Ususi. They both stood ready, Marrec with Justlance, Ususi poised to fling a spell.

"I guess I should thank you," continued Anammelech in a conversational tone, "You fit the description of those who slew my compatriot. I've always fancied Gloomgate, but the weapon was given him by the Talontyr. With Gameliel's death, Gloomgate passed to me." He gestured with the halberd-shaped profanity.

Despite the part of his mind warning him against striking up a conversation with the blightlord, Marrec blurted, "Our description?"

"When it appeared to me, it told me of Gameliel's slaying, and about his slayers. It told me of all your plans, so you see, I knew you were going to Yeshelmaar. I even guessed you might come here, chasing after that poor little girl."

Marrec glared at the dark weapon. Intelligent weapons were rare, and those aligned with evil even more so. Truly

Gloomgate was an abomination.

"Imagine my surprise when our spy Fallon gifted me with this..." said the blightlord as he drew forth the dully glinting Keystone.

Marrec's eyes widened. Ususi gasped.

"Where's Ash?" rasped the unicorn warrior. If Anammelech had the Keystone, he must also have the girl.

"I sent Ash' along ahead with Fallon. The Talontyr wants to see her." Anammelech chuckled, though the sound bubbled up as if from lungs choked with fluid.

Marrec brought his own spear up, tip dancing a few feet away from unconcerned features of Anammelech. "We destroyed Gameliel and doubt not that you'll fall just as easily. So leave us, and retreat whence you've come. If we find that you're following us, we'll be forced to destroy you. You've been warned."

Anammelech's chuckle grew into a full-throated laugh of incredulity.

"First," added Ususi, "Hand over the Keystone. It is mine." She held out her left hand palm up.

"You want this?" asked the blightlord, a playful note in his voice. He dangled the Keystone higher, causing it to swing back in forth before Ususi. "I'm afraid I've grown quite fond of it in just the short time it's been with me. Quite an interesting little area this trinket unlocks. Once I've dealt with you, I intend to explore it at my leisure."

Marrec came to the end of his patience. "You've had your warning."

Anammelech sighed. He said, "Don't you think Gloomgate has informed me of your abilities? Even now, it whispers to me of your failing spells, your needy spear with its inability to be parted from you, and your sad devotion to a diminished goddess. And you," he turned his empty sockets on Ususi, "are completely reliant upon spells, especially fire. Good thing fire has no power over me."

Like the head of a striking adder, the axe head of Gloomgate

lashed out, slashing Ususi down the side. Black mist smoked off the halberd, tracing its deadly path through the air. The blade left a horribly long, deep gash. Blood flowed. Ususi screamed as she collapsed backward then fell prone, unmoving.

"Now, you're dead," concluded Anammelech.

Marrec berated himself for speaking to the blightlord. Anammelech had lulled them with his calm approach and insipid conversation. Without speaking, he drove Justlance hard into the blightlord's body, attempting to thrust through the migrating plate armor, but the enchanted armor resisted.

The moving plates caught his thrust and held his spear fast between two segments. He grunted, attempting to push the spear through.

Anammelech was back to chuckling.

Marrec mentally grasped the remaining charge of strength left in the gauntlets given to him by the Nentyarch. In one gulp, all the remaining magic stored in the gloves was drained and instead danced in his sinews. With a truly superhuman effort granted by that strength, he broke through the resistance of the sliding armor as if it were tissue. His spear penetrated all the way through Anammelech's body. His gauntleted hands still held to the shaft but were pressed up against Anammelech, so far had the blightlord been run through,

"I should have told you," confided Anammelech, his face inches from Marrec, his breath as rotten as spoiled flesh, "Armor is just a shape I like to take on occasion. Really, I'm much more amorphous." The blightlord's 'armor' began to writhe where it touched Marrec's spear. A horribly sentient surge of liquid ooze ran up the spear shaft, up Marrec's arms, and across his face.

Marrec convulsed, attempting to throw himself back. The flowing ooze had too strong a grip on him. The blightlord's entire body opened up like a wet glove and attempted to

engulf him.

Realization flashed for Marrec. He had seconds to live, and his mind was giving him the grace of slowed perception to allow him to come to terms with his fate. Nothing he did would matter; all his options pointed to his ending. He could accept that, he decided, but not without a statement.

The flowing grip of Anammelech strengthened as he was pulled more firmly into an all-encompassing grasp of living ooze.

Marrec would die, yes, but he would expire while being true to his long-hidden nature. Maybe he could do some good and redeem both himself and the sin that still stained his heart since he had slain Thanial so long ago...

The blightlord's voice purred, close and intimate, "I told you I knew all about you."

The unicorn warrior whispered back, "Did your damned weapon tell you about my eyes?"

"Why would it?"

Marrec's terrible gaze was drawn out like a sword from its scabbard.

"What's this? What... That's not..." Anammelech tried to heave his flowing body away from the searing gaze of the cleric. Marrec's eyes had become a strobe of light and dark illumination, blasting into the flesh of the blightlord with a transformative grasp that Anammelech was incapable of resisting.

Laughter was gone then. As the stone tide overtook the soft-bodied blightlord, one last whimper escaped the Talontyr's servant before his voice, too, was locked in a tomb of stone.

"Marrec can handle himself," grunted Gunggari, not for the first time.

Elowen gritted her teeth as she slashed the length of Dymondheart through the form of yet another twigblight that had sidled too close. The creature explosively shattered with the contact. The living wood of her intelligent blade

was anathema to the obscene creatures. Dymondheart's mere touch not only robbed them of animation but violently dissembled the creatures into so much kindling. The larger ones were smart enough to stay back, but every few seconds a smaller twigblight forgot the fate of all its earlier siblings and rushed forward. Despite the dozens she had shattered, a whole herd of the constructions followed behind them down the arch-defined lane, keeping pace. Maybe that was what they were supposed

to do, merely keep her and the Oslander busy.

Elowen guarded as Gunggari paused and got down on his haunches again, studying the dirt, still on the trail of Fallon, Henri, and Ash. Elowen's training and natural abilities were sufficient to follow the trail without too much trouble, but she had to keep Dymondheart ready. Besides, Gunggari's ability to track verged on the supernatural. He made observations about their quarry that even Elowen at her best could not deduce from simply looking at the disturbed ground.

Gunggari said, "This track is over three hours old." He rose, continuing his swift pace. Elowen followed after, her eyes to the rear, guarding their flank.

She asked, "How did Fallon get so far ahead of us?"

The elf saw Gunggari's shrug out of the corner of her eye. He offered, "Ususi said time was mismatched between the interior and exterior of her pathway dimension. The elf must have exited much earlier than we thought."

Elowen checked to make sure the rustling, creaking, walking grove of dead sticks keeping pace with them moved no closer. Satisfied, she stole a glance forward along their route. The green haze was thicker, further limiting visibility ahead. The stone arches were getting farther apart, more eroded, and less able to keep out the undergrowth. Trees and other forest growth crowded into the lane from either side. Whatever property kept the lane open at the other end seemed to be failing so far into the forest. Elowen had never

walked so far under the Arches of Xenosi. She was idly curious about finding the last arch.

Though the mist was thicker ahead, their passage up the lane seemed to have dispersed the haze behind, because she could see at least twice as far along their path in that direction. Still no sign of Marrec.

Elowen bit her lip. She was torn between continuing along after Ash, or going back to see what had become of the other half of their group.

"Gunggari, tell me what you think about this," began Elowen. "Fallon and Ash are three hours ahead. That means that Ash is at least three hours out of our reach, but Marrec and Ususi are only minutes out of our reach I think we can sacrifice a few more minutes out of three hours just to make sure everything's OK with our friends."

Gunggari paused again, wrinkling his brow. Finally he said, "Very well. We can head back, though I have never known Marrec to fail any challenge."

"Challenges have a way of escalating."

"True," responded Gunggari. He turned a full one hundred eighty degrees to face the woody facade of their chaperones. "Perhaps Marrec's spear is not quite so deadly against these evil wood spirits as your elf blade."

Elowen raised one eyebrow. "Elf blades have their uses, after all."

She brought the blade in question up, then swung a wide roundhouse arc, shattering two creatures that had skittered too near into a spray of twigs. The others ceased their forward movement, while those immediately in front of the two travelers tried to backpedal. The monsters further behind failed to stop immediately, pushing yet another twigblight forward to lose its cohesion on Dymondheart's length.

As dead twigs rained down around her, Elowen yelled, "We're going this way." She pointed with the tip of her sword back along their path. "If you don't want to end today a pile

of splinters, get out of our way."

As she'd hoped, the larger, smarter creatures began to shuffle back, herding their smaller, more numerous brethren with them. That's when all the creatures went insane.

As if in response to a signal neither she nor Gunggari could see, the enchanted twig constructs went on a rampage en masse. Twigblight turned upon brother twigblight, with the larger ones immediately tossing a

few of the smaller creatures headlong through the air, but the smaller monsters swarmed the larger ones like ants on a piece of meat.

For Elowen and Gunggari, that sudden madness included a loss of respect for Dymondheart.

Despite destroying three creatures in as many rapid eye blinks, another was already slashing past her guard, hacking at her face with its sickle-like fingertips. She flinched back, only to trip over a tiny twigblight that had rushed up from the side.

Gunggari steadied her with a lightning-fast hand. He said, "Back to back. These things have lost their fear of death."

A flailing branch scratched Elowen's cheek. Her counterattack exploded that one nicely, but two more encroached from the left. One failed to,penetrate her armor; the other sliced her along the neck. The pressure of Gunggari's back flexed and strained; he was fighting off attacks no less massive than she, though he did not have Dymondheart to even the odds. The sound of his dizheri swishing through the air created a strange melody all its own, almost as if it were being played in truth. She grunted as she deflected a twiggy body hurling through the air—one of the big ones had thrown one its small brothers at her, but apparently by accident. She managed to clip the tumbling creature with her blade; the twigblight came apart before impacting her.

She yelled, "What's happened?"

She could hear Gunggari grunting with exertion as he

fought off the unrelenting wave. Finally he said, "Less talk. More sword."

"They've gone mad!"

She realized that if the creatures had earlier decided to rush her and the Oslander without fear of casualties, they'd have been overwhelmed already, but the branch golems were attacking each other as much as the intruders in the lane. Already more than half of the creatures that had surrounded them lay unmoving and dismembered on the ground, choking the lane with so much kindling. A terrible stench also grew. When the monsters perished, they leaked a foul-smelling ooze.

Gunggari cried out behind her. A second later, the pressure of his back against hers was snatched away. Whirling around with her blade extended straight out from her body, she managed to detonate three more creatures as she sought to locate her friend. His feet dangled at eye level. Craning her head, she saw that a large twigblight had caught up the southlander in a punishing grip of tightening wood.

Elowen rushed forward. The creature's hands were busy clutching the struggling Oslander, so the monster couldn't prevent her from running it through with Dymondheart. It fared no better against her blade's touch than the others, and Gunggari awkwardly fell away from the bed of splintered wood that had been his captor. She kept the remaining creatures at bay. The creatures were doing a better job of destroying each other than she could have purposefully managed.

After the tattooed soldier scrambled to his feet, he and Elowen backed up to a nearby arch. They sought to get out of the eye of the madness.

The rampage ended when a swarm of smaller twigblights, having just overcome a larger sibling, turned on each other in an impressive spray of splinters. Finally, only Elowen and Gunggari remained standing in a lane choked with debris reminiscent of the aftermath of a storm. Pregnant silence

descended.

Gunggari cocked his head, then said, "Somebody's coming." He turned his gaze back in the direction they had just tried. Materializing out of the fast-dispersing greenish haze was what at first seemed an oddly shaped silhouette. The strange silhouette quickly resolved into two people, one carried by the other.

It was Marrec, running wildly under the arches. He carried the limp, lolling form of Ususi in his arms. Blood streamed from Marrec's eyes as if he wept life itself, or as if he endured a grief so great that only tears of blood could express his remorse.

Elowen swallowed, knowing that Ususi must be dead. Hollowness invaded her heart.

Gunggari raised a hand to the quickly approaching figure and said quietly, yet loudly enough to be heard, "Pause awhile, warrior. Lay down your burden."

The sound snapped the man from his running trance. His blood-glazed eyes focused on Gunggari and Elowen. The elf gasped when the gaze swept across her. Even apart from the unsettling red film over his orbs and the scarlet trails leaking from the corner of each eye, Marrec's gaze seemed to brush her with an almost predatory jolt.

"Oh my..." whispered Elowen. Something had changed, she could see that. Some part of her companion had come alive, and for some reason she couldn't identify, that thought was somehow distressing.

Marrec stopped. He gently laid Ususi to the ground. Elowen saw that the woman was bandaged, and breath, however slight, still passed her lips. "Ususi!" yelled Elowen and bent to tend her friend.

Marrec made as if to say something else, but unconsciousness claimed him before he could elaborate. Gunggari caught him before Marrec fell face first into the branch-scattered lane.

CHAPTER 17

A bone petal fell from the stem of the flower. It fell only half a foot to the slab of rough cut stone that supported the flower's vase. In a way completely unlike a flower, the petal cratered the stone slab as if shot from a crossbow. The sound of its impact thundered around the petrified walls of the Close. The new crater overlaid another, slightly older crater. Only a single petal remained.

One of the two figures standing near the slab said simply, "Anammelech is dead."

Damanda had spoken. She had entered the Close to confer with her lord when the petal fell. She looked at the final remaining petal. The remaining petal signified her connection with her master who stood nearby. In the aftermath of the other petal's impact, she was the most important agent to the Talontyr's campaign north of the Great Dale by dint of survival alone. Her brother blightlords were dead. She remained to be tested.

The Rotting Man cursed, using a language once reserved for raising abominations by a race not native to Faerun. No living creature had spoken that language for eight thousand years, but such was the heat of the Talontyr's fury that he broke an ancient covenant in breathing the words aloud. Each syllable crystallized into a locustlike entity with hatred for blood and a carapace of shimmering purple. With an effort of will, the Rotting Man switched to a less potent tongue, one with less likelihood of its merest utterance binding even his soul to an unmentionable darkness.

The shimmering creatures buzzed about the Rotting Man's head for a moment, surprised by their release from whatever nether dimension they had resided. Damanda stiffened, wondering if she was going to be tested sooner than she expected. The curse-born insects buzzed away like misshapen horseflies but quicker, and with malice aforethought.

"Are those something I'll have to deal with too?" wondered Damanda, waving after the flitting creatures. She figured

that with the way things were shaping up, the Rotting Man couldn't afford to lose another lieutenant to one of his fits of rage.

The Talontyr, cloaked in his swathe of rot, ceased his curse rampage. He spoke, his voice initially unsteady from its unintended foray, "I rather think yes. Later. We have more pressing tasks to attend."

"The cleric and his small band?" asked Damanda, though she already knew the answer.

What else had so occupied her lord's mind these last few tendays? The Rotting Man was quiet with the details, but whoever the "cleric" was, the Talontyr seemed consumed with reports of his progress, which he received from agents unknown to Damanda, or perhaps via simple spells of divination.

The Talontyr answered, "Gameliel's failure seemed an accident, but Anammelech's breakdown indicates a trend, don't you think, pretty Damanda?" He extended fingers not quite bereft of flesh, running them through the air near the blightlord's face, coming close, but not touching, Damanda's pale features.

Despite her special nature, she was still relieved to avoid that touch. She said, "The cleric and his group have had their successes, but their path seems clear. They are coming here. No matter their power, they can't hope to stand against you, Talona's favored, and your strongest servants, not to mention your... project."

The cloaked figure laughed then. Damanda was inured to unpleasantness, but she still had to resist stopping up her ears to keep that sound out.

Still chuckling, the Rotting Man said, "Your fellows had but one task—bring the Child of Light to me here in the Close. In their incompetence, they not only lost their lives, but they also impeded the cleric, who had already decided to bring that which I seek directly to me in his own misjudged initiative."

Damanda said nothing but leaned closer to indicate her interest.

"You wonder how I know all this? There is a spy in the Nentyarch's Court. Yes, it's true. He has served our cause before with bits of information channeled through Anammelech, but he took an audacious step. He revealed himself. In a bid to leapfrog his way into Anammelech's heart and good graces, Fallon has plucked the Child of Light from the cleric and even now seeks to deliver the Child directly to me."

"Fallon? Who's he?"

"One of the Nentyarch's hunters. Anammelech turned him. This Nentyar hunter is in our pocket. Anammelech has kept me apprised of Fallon's reports and progress."

Damanda frowned, realizing her brother blightlord had accomplishments in some areas greater than her own, another reason to be glad that Anammelech was not around to receive the Rotting Man's accolades.

"Anammelech had a delightful ambush arranged." Some of the joviality left the Talontyr's demeanor. "That ambush seems to have backfired, but I pray that Fallon is still ahead of the cleric and that the traitor elf has the Child of Light with him."

"Does he?" wondered Damanda. "We just 'saw' Anammelech fall, how can we be sure that Fallon is not also dead, and the Child of Light back in the hands of the cleric?"

Her voice was tight. She wondered what force had overtaken her, making her question her master and thereby precipitate harm to herself. The Rotting Man was not one to gainsay without consequence. Of course, most harm could not long impair her, given her supernatural resilience.

The Rotting Man shook with some unnamed palsy but did not strike down Damanda. He turned and walked a few short strides. He stopped before one of the great petrified trees that formed the periphery of the Close.

He said, "Anammelech plans ahead. He equipped his spy

with a means to communicate with his paymaster. I can also access that communication link."

The Talontyr began to spew syllables toward the tree, giving voice to a rough and somehow obscenely urgent chant. He ran his slender digits across the gnarled bark, caressing it. The dead wood began to shift and mold itself, soon- enough forming the likeness of a face. Damanda thought the features seemed elven and possibly masculine. Sometimes it was hard to be sure with that androgynous race.

The face spoke, saying in a weak voice, as if relayed from a great distance, "Who's there? Is that you, Anammelech?" Though the face was that of an elf, its texture was that of petrified wood, briefly animate through the workings of the Talontyr's sorcery.

"It is to Anammelech's master you speak," intoned the Talontyr.

The expression on the woody face grew slack with amazement then fear. When it could speak, the face sputtered, "My Lord, I... Where is Anammelech?"

"Anammelech is dead, Fallon. He fell to those who pursue you."

"Marrec and Elowen? I didn't think they had the power to contest a blightlord. Where are they?" squeaked the voice, its spike in tone betraying sudden apprehension.

"I don't know their precise location, Fallon, but you can be assured that as we speak they are growing closer to you. You have only a small chance to escape them, but you will, if you do as I command," instructed the Rotting Man. "If you fail, they'll likely kill you. Don't think that I won't summon your spirit, from whatever afterlife it attempts to find, so that I can punish you for your failure. I have devised punishments that even the dead fear to feel."

Damanda knew that last boast to be true.

"Of course, my lord. Instruct me," shuddered the faraway voice of Fallon.

"They will catch you if you stay above ground. You must lead

them into a trap, below the boggy forest."

"Below?"

"Yes. This forest was a dark place, even before my arrival," chuckled the Rotting Man. "Why do you suppose the Nentyarch placed his seat of power here in the center of the Rawlinswood? To seal the unquiet Nar demons that still walk the blind paths below us. To stopper up Under-Tharos."

"Nar demons?" quavered Fallon.

"Do not interrupt me, elf. You may not know it, but Dun Tharos extends its crypt-like tunnels deep underground, though the Rawlinswood has choked shut most entrances. While my Close sits at the center of Dun Tharos on the surface, the extent of the city is far vaster below ground, showing only its tip here in the light. In truth, the Close is surrounded by a subterranean complex of great plazas and wrecked temples devoted to demonic powers. The treasures of Narfell's fallen lords lie in buried storehouses and underground conjuring chambers. It was one of the reasons I chose to take this place as my own. Secrets can be had here that even I, Talona's favored, could stand to learn."

"I am to venture into this complex?"

"You are. I am sending Damanda to meet you. She can guide you through some of the most dangerous portions."

The blightlord smiled slightly upon hearing her name and the purpose the Rotting Man intended for her. She always enjoyed a chance to walk Under-Tharos. She was a seeker after lost secrets, too.

The Rotting Man continued, "You must keep pressing forward, Fallon. The demons bound by the sorcerers of fallen Narfell sleep; you can pass by them, but they are sensitive to the presence of mortal life, and in your wake they shall open their eyes. The cleric and his band will find roused demons barring their path. They will be turned back, or they will be killed. Either way, I succeed."

Fallon had the temerity to stutter, "What if a demon gets me

and this child that you prize?"

"Keep moving. Do not linger in any one area too long. Do this, and you will live. Stay alive until Damanda reaches you. That is the only task you have. If by chance you should fail... well, the child whom you accompany may survive events that your frail flesh cannot, but I'd rather not put that surmise to the test."

"How will I find an entrance?" asked Fallon's rigid image.

In answer, the Talontyr touched the animate wooden mask on the forehead. The face screamed in sudden pain. The wood lost its coherence and gradually flattened back to stiff, petrified uniformity. The scream faded slowly away.

The Rotting Man turned to Damanda. "I implanted the location of the entrance directly into his mind. It seemed easiest." His eyes narrowed "My new pawn will be entering through the Barrow of the Queen Abiding. It is the Barrow onto which the Arches of Xenosi connect, after all. He's nearly on top of the entrance already. From there, he has a fairly straight path to us here at the center."

"What about the Lurker in the Middle?" asked Damanda. She remembered the name from another of the Rotting Man's foray's into the dungeons. That group had found the main passage contested by a creature, perhaps a demon, though that was uncertain, of considerable power. "Won't Fallon and the child have to pass the Lurker to reach here, not to mention all the rest?"

"That's why I'm sending you. Intercept him before he reaches the Middle Lurker. Keep the child safe from the Lurker. I do not much care what happens to Fallon, of course. He may serve as a useful distraction, should the Lurker prove too formidable. In fact, when I touched his mind, I implanted a seedling of control that should render him incapable of doing anything other than what I command."

Damanda took a deep breath. "As you will, Lord. Allow me to take my leave, so that I can make preparations. I should depart immediately."

The Rotting Man waved her away, saying, "I expect to see you again soon, Damanda, with the child by your side."

"You shall."

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Fallon's head pounded, as if someone had driven a spike through his skull. He couldn't quite recall where he was...

The elf studied his surroundings—broken cobbles, through which sickly grass protruded, and nearby, hooves. His gaze climbed higher, and he saw the pony and the child seated quietly in her saddle. A silent expanse of gray forest enclosed them to either side, though they were

within a partially clear lane. He remembered his conversation with the Rotting Man, then, and groaned.

In fact, the pounding in his head was an image of the lane, brutally imprinted on his consciousness. In his mind's eye, a spectral map revealed that the lane completely petered out at the foot of an overgrown mound not far from where he lay. Knowledge on how to open the mound, no, the barrow, rose like gorge in his throat. He groaned again, louder—not good. The elf was in pain, but he rose to his feet in a fluid motion, a testament to his race. The square of a cobble had pressed a red mark into his face.

Fallon considered, rubbing his jaw. Anammelech had assured him that Fallon's pursuers were as good as dead, but it was Anammelech who had departed the flesh. The blightlord's killers were probably right behind him. While being caught by those who thought him a betrayer was an unsettling thought, he was more afraid of his apparent new status in Rawlinswood. He answered directly to the Rotting Man.

As Anammelech's secret ear in the court of the Nentyarch, he was well rewarded. Other than his last act, the kidnapping of a child, he'd never taken any outright action that made him feel as if he was actively betraying the Nentyarch. With Anammelech's death, his service had apparently passed directly into the Talontyr's keeping. He wasn't foolish enough to regard that status shift as a good

thing. He didn't know what would be asked of him next. More worrisome, he was pretty sure the Rotting Man cared not at all for Fallon's safety.

Looking through the growth of the forest, he knew that his options were limited. He was in too deep. If he fled his commitment to the Rotting Man, he did not doubt that he'd turn up dead quick enough. Even if he did escape, the Nentyarch and his hunters would dispense their own justice, if they should find him. The only thing to do was soldier on.

The pain in his head seemed

to promise worse should he fail in that decision.

Fallon took the pony's reins. The small horse's eyes rolled in its sockets, but the child on its back had a calming influence on the beast. The little girl, about five years old, judged the elf, sat her saddle quietly, oblivious to her state and surroundings.

Fallon said, "You've brought me a lot of trouble, girl." No response. He'd expected none. He wondered if he could get some sort of reaction out of his captive.

"Lucky I don't have your skin for a cloak. That's probably what the Rotting Man has in store for you."

The calm blink she treated him with belied any discomfiture the child might be feeling. He shrugged. The girl was damaged, despite everyone's interest in her. He hoped her state was known to the Talontyr—he didn't want to be blamed for her shortcomings. Still, he couldn't help feeling the slightest bit sorry for the little tyke...

He hastily put that thought from his mind. Down that road lay a quantity of self-recrimination that Fallon was not prepared to accept. Considering the consequences of his actions on others was something for which he knew he didn't have the moral fortitude.

Fallon led the pony and its rider along the evaporating lane. He hadn't seen a stone arch for the last several hundred feet, and cobblestones were few and far between. He might as well have been walking through native forest.

The barrow was visible ahead. Brown grass covered it, though bare patches of earth showed through in many places. Only his "gift" of knowledge from the Talontyr alerted him to the mound's significance.

He moved to the edge of the earthen heap, raised one hand and inscribed a sign on the air, according to his special instructions. By the time he finished tracing the sigil, the lines he'd imagined solidified to visibility in the air.

"Huh," he commented, surprised.

The sign, a complex figure featuring a star inscribed within the circumference of a circle, pulsed through the color spectrum, beginning then ending in coal black. Without further fanfare, the floating symbol fell on the face of the mound, enlarging in size as it fell, so that the diameter of the figure easily reached ten feet across as it impacted the earth. The figure melted away, but as it did so, the earth framed within the circle did likewise.

An earthen staircase descended downward, the steps small and cramped, the angle steep. A rush of stale, dusty air plumed from the opening, blowing back Fallon's hair.

He nodded appreciatively at the entrance's appearance then frowned.

Fallon lifted Ash from her saddle, setting her on her feet. He said to the small horse, "You've reached the end of your use, damn the luck."

Fallon pulled his sword free, deciding to tie up a loose end. The pony continued to stand peacefully without moving.

At the last moment, he held back with his intended thrust. Too much thinking about consequences, damn him. Ash's mount fixed the former Nentyar hunter with his gaze then dashed away up the lane.

Surprised at his softness, he decided that running down the horse would only cost time that he probably couldn't afford. Maybe the discovery of the horse without its passenger would worry his pursuers, and give him a little more time. The drumbeat of pain from the image implanted in his head

by the Rotting Man seemed to be growing, and he didn't want complications.

Fallon sighed as he unstowed the hooded lantern he had brought with him out of Yeshelmaar. Its fanciful designs of leaf and bough reminded him again of what was behind him. He carefully filled the reservoir with clear oil all the same.

Taking the girl's hand, he and the Child of Light descended into the Barrow of the Queen Abiding.

CHAPTER 18

JVlarrec blinked. Surprised, he blinked again. The pain was gone, the physical pain, anyway. Anguish lay like a canker on his conscience, ready to bite with too thorough an exploration.

Someone spoke. He was too numb to understand what was said, but it sounded like a woman's voice.

Marrec tried to focus his vision. At his feet was a banked campfire within a circle of stones. He recognized the stones as cobbles dug up from the lane he'd been traversing when Anammelech had caught them...

He groaned, bringing the heels of his hands to his eyes. He rubbed, too vigorously, and saw stars. He didn't care. He'd rub his eyes out of their sockets if he could.

Hands, small but strong, grasped his wrists. He let the hands, soft, draw his own hands away

from his eyes. It was the mage, pale, ragged, but alive.

"Ususi!" Despite his resolve, his spirits rose a fraction. "I thought the blightlord killed you."

"He nearly did. He would have finished the job, but you must have stopped him. The others tell me you rescued me, carrying me like a child."

Marrec shook his head, saying "I don't remember what happened after I killed Anammelech."

"How did you manage it? He had a power in him unlike any that I've ever faced. I feared both our tales were at a close."

Marrec looked grim.

"Why the frown, Marrec?" asked Ususi. "It was him or me,

and I like to think I was the better choice." Ususi bent forward and delivered a quick kiss to his cheek. "Thank you." Though Marrec struggled mightily, the gloom in which he wrapped himself lightened by a measure. He muttered, "You're welcome."

Ususi smiled. "Now, get up. Elowen and Gunggari are anxious to be off after Fallon and Ash. That betrayer can't be too far ahead." Looking past the mage, he saw the two Ususi named making preparations to leave. Didn't they understand that his vow had been broken? Then again, how could they know?

But Ash's name galvanized him. Maybe he was nothing but a sham of a person, hiding a monstrous heart and a terrible ability, but that person could still try to do good.

"Get up," repeated Ususi, impatient then. "You're not even hurt as badly as me."

That was more like the woman he remembered. Marrec pulled himself to his feet. He said, "I intend to find Ash, but I want to tell you something first. Back there, I thought Anammelech had ended you. I thought hope was lost for me, too. In desperation, I had to break a promise I'd made long ago... I called up something in myself that is monstrous."

Ususi narrowed her eyes, looking a question at Marrec.

Marrec couldn't bring himself to say more.

Ususi said, "I don't know what you're talking about, and perhaps I do not want to know. We all have secrets, you know, but listen. You are the man your actions make you, nothing more, nothing less, and I don't see a monster standing before me."

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When Henri appeared, sans Ash, Marrec feared the worst, but Elowen noted that there were still supplies in Henri's saddlebags. The horse yet wore the bridle given it by the Nentyarch. The elf hunter figured the horse had escaped, nothing more.

Gunggari soon confirmed her hypothesis when he

backtracked the horse to the lane's end. A hole gaped in the base of a weed-infested mound. The Oslander indicated clear signs that two people, one a child, had entered the mound, taking steep stairs downward.

"How much time?" asked Marrec.

"Not more than an hour. We have a real chance to catch them."

Ususi said, "It appears we have reached the dark ways the Nentyarch described."

Marrec asked, "Where is the map the Nentyarch gave us? Does it show this entrance?"

Elowen retrieved the map scroll from her pack and unrolled it across the face of a large boulder. The group gathered round.

"Unfortunately, no," said Elowen after a few seconds of study.

Marrec identified the Rawlinswood and the Arches of Xenosi. The map recorded where the Arches petered out, apparently where they stood. According to the map, the entrance identified by the Nentyarch was further back, located midway along the lane made by the

Arches and about half a mile to the east of the lane.

Ususi said, "This mound isn't even noted on the map. It's a waste."

Elowen replied, the slightest flush tinting her face, "Don't be rash. If Fallon is heading for the center, no doubt he shall wander onto or across the route marked by the Nentyarch."

Marrec pointed to a tag on the map, asking, "What's the 'Lurker in the Middle' and why should we 'beware' it?"

Elowen said, "Some Nar demon bound below the earth, probably, but maybe not completely bound."

Gunggari asked, "I would like to know more about these Nar. Such knowledge may aid us if we venture into their realm of old."

Elowen nodded, rolling up the map. She said, "I can tell you something of ancient Narfell. This is what my mentor taught

me when I was a child.

"More than a thousand years ago the sorcerous land of Narfell grew mighty on the strength of its unholy mages and cruel priest-lords. It was Narfell's trafficking with demons that contributed to its eventual downfall, though I do not know specifically the event that brought them down. Secrets of the old Nar lore draw unscrupulous spellcasters who attempt to plunder buried vaults in search of knowledge and power. Rawlinswood is thick with these vaults. It's sort of like one extended vault, I suppose."

Ususi commented, "One can't be a practicing mage in these parts without hearing about Nar rituals, Nar obscenities, and trinkets of supposed Narfell vintage. I've found that most are fakes, sold by fakir wizards to the credulous."

Marrec realized that Ususi was admitting to being fooled herself on at least one occasion.

"Demons and foul magic, then," said Gunggari. "Can demons be any worse than the blightlords and their pets we've already faced?"

Ususi said, "They could. Demons are not from the world. They have an infernal power, and some even have abilities that could imperil your immortal spirit."

"Hmm," was Gunggari's only response.

Marrec walked to the edge of the mound entrance. "Let's go."

Gunggari and Ususi stepped forward, but Elowen said, "Hold on, what about Henri? We can't just leave him."

Ususi said, "This isn't the first time I've heard of such things—mounts being left at the mouths of subterranean passages too narrow for hooves. He should be safe enough until we return. If we return."

"He won't be safe in the Rawlinswood." The elf stroked the pony's mane.

Marrec paused. He had much on his mind, but he knew he couldn't forsake the creature. He said, "Henri is too large to negotiate the stairs."

"Too bad. We could have used a packhorse," said Gunggari. The Oslander was nothing if not practical.

"Remember, Elowen, he yet wears the gift of the Nentyarch. It was that magic that probably allowed Henri to find us just now. I don't doubt that it will see him safe all the way back to Yeshelmaar."

Elowen subsided. "I suppose you're right. He's probably safer than we are, come to think of it. We've just cleared the path back out of the forest."

They sent Henri on his way. The pony didn't seem dispirited to put his back to the dark, ill-smelling stairs.

They descended. The stairs were steep. Worse, the breadth of each step was shallow. Hard packed earth, then smooth stone, rose up on either side as they descended ever deeper below the surface.

Ususi conjured a light, one on the tip of Marrec's spear, and one for herself. The radiance was strong and unwavering, exactly unlike the light of a torch or even magical lights that emulated candle or torch flame to which Marrec was most accustomed. The woman possessed exotic spells, that was certain.

"It's getting colder," said Marrec.

Ususi responded, "That's normal underground."

"No. I mean, I've experienced the subterranean chill before—this is unnaturally cold."

The stairs ended on a landing below. The light on Marrec's spear revealed the truth of his words. Ice slicked the walls, glinting like crystal. An icy arch opened into a dark space beyond.

Marrec stepped off the stairs and up to the arch. He thrust his light through to reveal a wide, flat tunnel, obviously worked. The passage was completely sheathed in ice to the limit of Marrec's light source. Ice sickles hung like stalactites from the ceiling. His breath steamed out before him

Marrec turned to Gunggari, "I don't suppose you brought your furs, eh?"

Gunggari shook his head, "They're back in Yeshelmaar. We departed too quickly for me to gather all my effects."

"Yeah, I remember," responded the cleric.

Gunggari bent, touching the floor. He said, "They went this way. Come."

A voice, stark and devoid of warmth, spoke from the darkness ahead. It said something in a language incomprehensible to Marrec.

Ususi said in a quiet voice, "That is the language of the Abyss. Looks like you get to meet your first demon, Gunggari."

A creature of black ice slid into the light. It eased to a stop not more than ten feet from Marrec, without any outward sign of effort or limb movement. The creature was something like a wolf, though its icy composition and size belied any thought of a natural origin. Points of red hellfire burned in its eye sockets. The shards and chunks of ice that made up the creature flexed and pulsed in sick

mockery of life, or with a life usually unknown except in the cold nether regions of Abyssal provenance. The monstrosity was wrapped in stink, reminiscent of a corpse buried in winter snow disturbed by scavengers.

The cleric made to cast his spear.

The demon spoke again, but that time in a language Marrec could understand. It said, "Parley." It rose to its rear legs, standing with an obscene approximation of a biped.

"Parley," it said again. "Speak with the Queen Abiding. Make agreement good for you, good for she that Abides."

When it talked, its breath chilled Marrec even where he stood.

"How can we trust you, demon?" called Ususi, coughing slightly, holding a hand over her mouth and nose.

The creature raised one hand palm forward and said simply, "Come."

Marrec refrained from casting Justlance. He asked, "Can you tell us about the male elf and child who passed this way a

little while ago?"

"Ask the queen."

Without looking away from the icy envoy, Marrec said, "What do you think, Gunny?"

"I have no experience with demons, Marrec, but someone told me once that demons are infernal." The tattooed soldier shot a glance at the mage.

Ususi chimed in, "Bargains with demons rarely work in the favor of any other than the demon in the long run."

The creature giggled then said, "Talk with queen. Good for you, good for us."

Elowen said, "Every fight we can avoid will leave us stronger later when we may need it the most."

"All right, lead us to your queen," Marrec finally said. "We can decide if we want to deal after we hear your pitch."

Daintily, despite its ungainly bulk, the creature pirouetted and slid swiftly back the way it had come. Its voice echoed out of the darkness, "Come!"

Gunggari shrugged. "This is also the way Fallon's tracks lead."

Marrec said, "Right. If we're lucky, they'll have his head wrapped in holiday paper for us, a present from the demon queen of Under-Tharos."

The group moved forward, their light by turns glinting off the ice that sheathed the corridor, other times completely absorbed. The tunnel emptied into a much wider space. Circular, the floor was ice but rough enough to offer some purchase. The walls and ceiling were filigreed with tracteries of brittle black ice. Tiny bits visibly crumbled in places, tinkling. In other places, the filigree grew quickly enough for Marrec to notice it. Sinister stalactite chandeliers hung like icy infestations above. Up until then, he'd always found the natural patterns formed by ice and snowflakes to be enchanting. That was the problem; nothing was natural. All was warped under the influence of evil born of dimensions far from Faerun.

Marrec hoped to Bee Ash and Fallon in the chamber, but his hope was unfounded. Instead, the chamber held only the demon who'd met them and a massive, cylindrical block of ice. Rivulets of water so black it looked like oil ran in tiny streams from the block, but through some process beyond Marrec's ken, the block grew no smaller.

As they walked carefully into the chamber, their light picked out forms in the ice below: humans, elves, a few dwarves, halflings, and other humanoids equipped in armor, wearing packs, expedition style. Marrec mentally theorized that the bodies represented a grisly collection of failed Dun Tharos explorers unlucky enough to find the Queen Abiding before them. Fallon and Ash were not among those frozen there.

"Where is your queen then?" asked Marrec.

Several of the stalactites shifted, dropping from the ceiling onto four shard-studded legs. They looked somewhat similar to demon who'd ushered them into the chamber. The newly revealed brumal demons began to rub their forearms together, creating a keening noise that drove cold spikes through Marrec's composure. They were outnumbered.

Marrec cleared his throat and said, "Queen Abiding, we come to parley, as we were bid."

One of the demons, the one closest to the central ice mass, slowly rose a limb, pointing an icy digit into the heart of the ice.

Marrec moved closer to the central ice, bringing the brilliant light glowing on his spear tip to bear, directly touching the crystalline surface.

The light leached into the ice, mixing like milk poured into oily tea. The keening of the demons grew louder. The suffusing light reached the center of the mass but refused to illuminate it. Something was held there, a blot of nothing, a dark beetle in amber, something the light refused to touch.

Their host croaked, "The Queen Abiding."

Improbably, the blot of darkness trapped in the center

moved. It surged forward, unrestrained by the feet of ice which surrounded it, as if the frozen water were but liquid. With a cry Marrec fell back, but the darkness stopped short of crashing out of the ice. It hovered just at the boundary, creating the illusion of a wall of darkness where it pressed up against the periphery of the icy mass.

A new voice spoke then, with a pleasant, even seductive female timbre. The voice said, "Are these the ones who disturbed our sleep?"

"No," spoke the original brumal demon. "Gone. Toward the center. Tramping and knocking, waking the sleepers. One elf, one child hiding power."

The woman's voice spoke again. Marrec knew it was coming from the dreadful blot caught in the ice. The voice had a cloying, thick quality beneath its velvet surface that made him shiver. "These follow after, eh? Well, speak up, followers. If my offspring were intent on freezing you into our collection, they'd have done so already, don't you think?"

Marrec inadvertently glanced down and saw a human woman's face and hand clutching a bow. He shook his head and said, "We do follow after. We seek a betrayer and have no interest in conflict with you, your kind majesty."

The woman's voice laughed. "Majesty, is it? I was old before your civilization was born. I am she whose name is unremembered. I served those of such power that they thought they could challenge the power of gods, but they are crumbled away now/while I remain, trapped. I must abide here until I can find the token of my freedom, but," she paused, "you may continue to address me as majesty. It pleases me."

The darkness roiled, as if beginning a slow boil. Its movements sometimes synched up with the speech, other times not. Marrec backed off from the ice wall a pace, but he was blocked from moving too far by the dark icy carapaces of the crowding demons. He noticed that his friends seemed

equally crowded. The smell of decay was quickly growing intolerable.

"Then, your majesty, please allows us to continue," requested Marrec, his breath steaming out before him.

"Though you may be surprised to learn it, I will indeed allow you to leave this chamber," purred the voice.

One of the gathered demons tittered as if at a joke only it had heard.

"But?" guessed Marrec, sensing something still unspoken.

"But," continued the voice, "I'm afraid I can't let you go free, can I? There is a condition that I must impose. You'll accept that condition, won't you, my fierce pet?"

Marrec locked eyes with Gunggari. Marrec raised one eyebrow; Gunggari shrugged, shaking his head. These motions required only a second, but a question was asked and answered: Marrec asked the Oslander what

he thought their chances were in a fight against the creatures. Gunggari responded that he couldn't gauge the outcome.

The cleric had some experience in gauging the power and threat of supernatural entities. His sense of the queen's power and level of abilities warned him that to fight the demon there, in the area that she infested and controlled so thoroughly, would prove a suicidal task.

Marrec spoke aloud, "Tell us your condition. We won't agree to it before you specify what you expect from us. If you're willing to negotiate in the first place, we must have something you need."

The voice was silent for a few moments. The icy creatures crowding Marrec and the others shifted their weight ominously.

The Queen Abiding finally intoned, "This is the condition on which I'll allow you to depart alive and without harm: find for me the token of my freedom and pledge to return it to me here."

"What's that?"

"It is the only remaining wall, spiritually speaking, that keeps me bound herein."

Marrec stalled, "We wouldn't know where to begin to search."

"I'll tell you exactly where it is. It lies here, in the ruins of Under-Tharos. Those frail-brained Nentyarchs squatted on it along with all the other leashes and tokens that bind us who remain locked in darkness. My children tell me that the last Nentyarch has fled, and another has assumed control at the center."

"The Rotting Man," supplied Elowen.

"That's right, that's what you call him, don't you? Talona's lap dog. He visited much pain on me, all unknowing, when he found my token of control when he first arrived. I owe him much for that. Then, like a dupe, he allowed my token to be stolen, ignorant of its true purpose. He's since [earned of his foolishness." The voice chuckled.

"I bet you know where your token now lies." "Of course."

Marrec sighed, then said, "You can't send one of your servants to run off and collect it?"

"Think a little before you speak. If it were that simple, we wouldn't be having this conversation. The token is meant to control me. I cannot exert my power to retrieve it, and my power enlivens and encompasses my 'children' who surround you."

"We could get this thing back for you, I'm guessing?"

"Another point for the human, and I thought you a turgid thinker," said the voice. "Listen closely. My token lies in a portion of this sprawling complex known as the Sighing Vault. It lies not too far from here, no more than a day of travel through Under-Tharos for those who stride on two legs. My senses cannot penetrate too deeply, but I can feel it lying at the center of the Sighing Vault. It glows like a splinter in my mind, taunting me with its closeness."

Ususi asked, "Is there anything you can tell us about the Sighing Vault? Did the Nar wizards use it for safekeeping of

their secrets, as the name implies?"

The blot bobbed, somehow miming a shrug with its formless darkness. "The Vault has its guardians. Kill them for me, and I'll be doubly grateful to you."

Elowen said, "We are already in the middle of a quest. We don't have time for a distraction like this. These ruins are mazelike. You could be sending us on a task that will take days or months."

"Perhaps, but consider the alternative: I suck the life out each and every one of you with a breath."

A coldness slipped then into Marrec's heart, ignoring his clothing, his flesh, his will. It was a sentient hol-lowness, burrowing into him. He fell, catching himself ' against the cold ice of the slab containing the queen. The pain of that chill contact was as nothing compared to the blizzard of dissolution in his soul. Then, like a cat

removing its paw from a stunned mouse with which it played, the cold vanished.

As he straightened, Marrec saw his friends begin to rise, or uncurl, from fetal positions. All of them had received the same treatment, simultaneously. Impressive. Terrifying. They were completely in the queen's power.

"You won't be so foolish to refuse me, will you?"

Marrec cleared his throat, tried to answer- After a moment, he tried again, "We might accept but die in the attempt to retrieve your trinket."

Laughter. Then, "I'll take that chance. If I kill you, then I'll never know, will I? So answer me. Do you agree to find the token of my freedom, wrest it from the Sighing Vault if you are able, and return it to me here?"

Gunggari gave him another shrug, shaky that time. Ususi looked unsure, but she was still shuddering from the queen's demonstration of her power.

Elowen said, "Why not, Marrec? Better to avoid this fight, save our strength for the Talontyr."

"What does this token look like?" questioned Marrec.

"You'll know it when you see it, human."

"All right, majesty. You've got yourself a deal."

The voice thundered, "Excellent. My children, allow our friends to depart, and you—" a tendril of darkness separated from the blot in the ice, its tip wavering, then pointing like an arrow toward one of the ice demon—"You! You will accompany our new friends. Lead them to the Sighing Vault. Make sure that they do not try to back out of our agreement."

The fiend indicated by the gesturing tendril coughed something incoherent.

Marrec and his group then numbered five.

CHAPTER 19

The chill faded as the Queen Abiding and her icy court fell behind. An all-too-obvious reminder of the visit was embodied in the monstrosity that moved ahead, leading the way. The creature slid along the broken masonry and loose earth of the underground passage as if skating on the smooth surface of a frozen lake.

No one said anything. Marrec was silently grateful. Internally, he wondered if he had made the right decision in dealing with the icy demon. Perhaps they should have refused to find the token for the Queen Abiding. Perhaps she had somehow bluffed them all?

Perhaps, but what's done is done, mused the cleric.

One good thing had come of his meeting with the formless blot caught in the ice. By comparison with the queen's monstrosity, he wondered if

his own heritage was so terrible. The queen was to evil like ice was to cold, inevitable. Marrec knew himself well enough to determine that he had very little in common with that creature.

They traveled down a path of tumbled pillars, undifferentiated rubble, dark side passages, and gloomy chambers, some empty, others filled with silhouettes of alarming clutter. Strange sounds sometimes blew in from

these darkened alcoves, causing the group to pause.

On a few occasions wooden doors, improbably sound and hardly rotted, proved to be barriers to forward progress, but only until their frigid guide once again moved forward to apply its hell-born brawn. Each such crash echoed away into the maze-like tunnels; sometimes the last, faintest echoes seemed to return, as if shaped into words or cries like a beast, or even screams. No one commented on that unsettling aspect of Under-Tharos, though Gunggari and Marrec exchanged worried glances with each occurrence. Neither was imagining the phenomena.

They broke out into a larger chamber. Stone obelisks poked up through shattered flooring in random collections, like clumps of grass in a garden. Marrec could detect no pattern to their arrangement. It seemed, indeed, that they had grown from the earth, though they were unmoving. Each obelisk was inscribed with cramped symbols, visible even from a distance, because a faint luminescence clung to the chisel marks.

Their demonic guide passed among the stones without a glance. They followed, walking the winding route chosen by their escort. Ususi threatened to loiter, her brows wrinkled as she studied an obelisk, but Elowen cupped the mage's elbow and urged her on. A dozen doors, all stone, broke off the chamber to the right and left. Some were cracked, others completely fallen and crumbling on the floor, opening on lightless obscurity.

The chamber turned out to be more of a hall. The stone obelisks grew fewer, but in their place were great iron blades, rusted and crumbling. Like the earlier stones, their arrangement seemed to follow no pattern the cleric could discern. Some of the blades reached up, grazing the high stone ceiling just visible in their light.

The hall finally reached its terminus at an arched opening. Stone valves lay broken and crumbled around the dark mouth. The demon skated past the fallen doors and through

the arch without a pause, and those he led followed after. Beyond was another hallway carved and dressed, but damaged by time. The smooth walls of the original tunnel were tumbled and breached. Strewn about the floor was loose rubble of the dilapidated hallway, bones, loose teeth, and patches of hide. A low susurrus of blended clicks, moans, and gurgles echoed from somewhere ahead. The sounds, or perhaps the evidence on the floor of recent habitation, gave the ice demon pause.

"What is it?" Marrec asked the demon, whispering.

The icy monster shrugged and said, "Never gone here before. Know the way, not the terrain, not the impediments."

"Are we even close?"

"Close. Maybe," responded the demon, before giggling.

"After you, then," urged Marrec, motioning the demon ahead with his illuminated spear.

The demon giggled again then slid ahead. The thick rubble was enough to cause it to raise its paws, pushing off walls, and step over boulders. It was moving almost like a natural quadruped. Almost.

A shape stepped out of the darkness directly into the path of the demon. It was a misshapen humanoid with a single horn upon its head. Great claws hung from its ungainly hands like infestations. Saliva ran from its tusks, whetting its leathery hide.

The ice demon made to side-step the sudden obstacle, but the newcomer, exploiting the demon's lack of response, jumped onto the icy creature's back with an ear-piercing howl of glee.

Answering howls rose from further back in the darkened hallway. The howls swiftly drew nearer. "Here we go," sighed Elowen.

The hunter unsheathed her gift from the Nentyarch. A glimmer of emerald vigor played at its edges. Marrec heard Ususi begin chanting. Gunggari already had his dizheri in hand ready for anything.

Their guide twisted mightily, trying to throw the horned attacker from its back, but the horned monster's claws found crevices in the ice, sinking in like pitons. The two began to tumble back and forth, grappling like miniature titans.

A group of smaller but similarly horned creatures broke into the light, some running on all fours, others sprinting on two legs. All were misshapen and horned. All were monstrous. None were of a type of creature Marrec had ever encountered or even heard described. Demons? He counted six, including the grappler.

Ususi ceased speaking and thrust one hand forward. A hail of sharp ice followed after, materializing at the behest of the wizard's incantation. The storm of ice, composed of razor-sharp crystals so thick that they momentarily obscured vision, pelted the faces and bodies of the advancing creatures, including their guide. The temperature in the hallway fell several degrees in the aftermath of the potent spell. Their adversaries screeched their displeasure and pain.

Marrec, Gunggari, and Elowen ran forward on the tail end of the blizzard. The ice had bowled over the creatures, leaving welts and oozing wounds, but all remained breathing. They began to scramble to their feet with unholy vigor.

Marrec didn't wait. He hurled Justlance directly into the gut of one creature. It squealed, slumping. Greenish fluid poured from the wound.

Gunggari and Elowen ducked past their chaperone demon and its attacker. The ice demon and the horned attacker had become a blur of flashing arms and legs, claws and teeth, tusks and spikes. Normally such an exhibition would draw Marrec's eye, but not then.

With a clatter of claws and hooves, the remaining four attackers surged forward.

Elowen engaged the foremost, Dymondheart pulsing in her grip like the live thing it was. Her foe was dismayed by the flashing green blade; a round-house slash to its neck lopped

off the creature's head before it could lay a single claw upon her.

At her side, Gunggari wielded his war club, facing off against two of the monsters simultaneously. His grip on the length of his dizheri was fluid and shifting, allowing him to attack with one hand then the other, sometimes poking, other times spinning and bashing with the full force of his extended arm and weapon length.

Marrec ran forward, screaming Lurue's name as a battle cry. Justlance returned to him while he ran, and he used it to stab one of the creatures facing Gunggari. It pawed at him but continued to devil the Oslander.

"What are these things?" yelled Marrec.

Elowen ducked a clawed-tipped swipe of the last attacker and yelled, "Ogres, maybe—crossbred with something nastier."

The light shed from Justlance pierced the darkness further, revealing two more of the "ogres." Slinking up quietly, they roared as the light touched them and charged. Marrec snagged one with his spear. The other flashed past.

He backpedaled, keeping the one he'd distracted busy with Justlance's tip. Ususi was a powerful wizard but fragile if undefended. Glancing back, he saw the wizard trace a pattern in the air before shooting her assailant through with sizzling bolts of fire. The monstrosity fell, but its violent momentum tumbled the bleeding, smoking body to within a foot of Ususi.

The two on Gunggari were working together, attempting to distract the tattooed warrior so that the other could attempt a killing blow. Before Marrec could assist, Elowen lunged sidewise with Dymondheart, which strobed green for the tiniest moment. Where the blade brushed one of Gunggari's attackers, the monster's hide erupted in green flame. Screaming, the creature ran back the way it had come, beating at its side. A heart beat later, the Oslander dropped the other creature with a resounding blow from his

war club.

Only three creatures remained, one on Marrec, one on Elowen, and the first and the largest still grappling with their chaperone demon. The horned ogre seemed to be getting the best of the fight. It was tearing away icy chunks, burrowing like a rodent in loose earth.

The Oslander called out his cry to battle as he turned and attempted to strike the horned ogre from the rear. Before Gunggari's cry was fully formed, a clawed foot pis-toned backward directly into Gunggari's neck. The man's cry choked off, and he was down, unmoving.

Marrec could do nothing; his attacker was trying to get past his whirling spear with its claw-tipped arms flailing. He considered using his talent, then paused, horrified that that particular thought would come so easily. His opponent nearly knocked Marrec to the floor in the cleric's distraction. Yet another swarm of fiery strands erupted from Ususi's fingers, striking Marrec's adversary before it could finish off the human who stumbled before it. Scratch one more horned ogre, thought Marrec, scrambling to his feet.

"Thanks, Ususi."

"I don't like debts outstanding," replied the wizard.

Glancing to his left, Marrec decided that Elowen had her foe on the ropes. He dashed to Gunggari's side and bent to check on him—still breathing but very hurt. Marrec studied the battle, wondering if he should pull Gunggari away from the flailing demon and horned ogre or help their chaperone. It wouldn't bother him too much

if their chaperone were slain. It was a demon after all...

Elowen finally pierced the defense of her foe. It dropped, gushing something other than blood onto the floor of the debris-strewn hallway.

Marrec decided to let queen's envoy and the attacking monster fight without interference. He grabbed Gunggari's satchel off the Oslander's belt, the one the Nentyarch had provided. Rummaging through it, he was surprised to note

four vials, each labeled with a name—Marrec, Gunggari, Elowen, and Ususi. Strange. He'd have to ask Gunggari about that later. A moment later his hand found a potent elixir of healing, as he'd guessed he would.

Back before Lurue's presence had faded from his day to day life, he had been able to brew similar miracles in a vial. Someday, he vowed, he'd regain that connection, but all he could do then was pour the pale blue contents down Gunggari's throat. A convulsive wave suffused the unconscious man's body, visibly closing wounds as the flush of health passed over his skin. Gunggari woke, coughed, blinked, and was on his feet only a second later. It wasn't the first time he'd been revived by magical resuscitation at Marrec's hands.

In a sudden turn-around, the ice demon finally managed to grasp its adversary's head between both of its front claws, something it had been trying to do the whole time. With the sound of crunching bone, the attacking creature's head was crushed in an instant. The horned ogre joined its brethren on the floor. The ice demon rose slowly, chipped and less bulky than before but triumphant. It tittered. The sound prickled Marrec's spine.

It was then a brutish, hollow voice echoed from the darkness. It said, "Lackey of she who is frozen in darkness: be still!"

Their chaperone demon staggered as if struck, then stood unmoving, frozen indeed, its icy body no longer animate.

"Who said that?" queried Ususi.

Marrec peered ahead, trying to ascertain the same thing. He thrust his spear tip forward, trying to will more light down the hallway.

Into the light came a shape. It was similar in form to the horned ogres they'd faced, but it was far larger and more sinister. A crown of horns protruded from its head like barbs. They glowed with a light Marrec knew instinctively was hellish. Marrec's face prickled with the evil that pulsed away

from the thing with steady beats, like a heartbeat ringing up from the depths.

It spoke again, "The queen learns from her earlier forays. She finally has the wit to send those other than creatures I can command at my least whim. Still, it won't avail her."

It ceased to speak, and took no other action but to stare a challenge at them. That seemed a potent enough threat to Marrec.

The cleric moved a step closer to the newcomer and addressed it, "We have no quarrel with you. Let us pass."

The monstrosity responded. "I disagree. I think you do have a quarrel with me, though you may not possess acumen enough to know it. You're traveling with one of the queen's children. I presume you are on the errand she has set them on so many previous occasions."

"What's that to you, creature?"

"If you are foolish enough to address me, mortal," said the creature, "You will address me by my proper title, or I'll sew your skin to my trophy tapestry out of turn. I am called Eschar."

Marrec repeated, "Why do you care if we travelers do the bidding of the Queen Abiding, Eschar?"

"Because," growled Eschar, "it is my task to guard the approach to the Sighing Vault. This tunnel that you transgress has only one destination. I'll grant you one guess where that is."

Marrec could guess easily, but he tried to stretch out the conversation further. "Your task? You mean, you're bound here, same as the Queen Abiding, by some long-dead Nar sorcerer's magic?"

Eschar said nothing, but the luminosity of his crown of horns doubled. Marrec had to squint to look at the creature.

Even had he an unfettered connection with Lurue, Marrec doubted he would have had strength enough to pray for a spell to banish demons directly out of the world, but he was familiar with the task. That possibility was out of the

question. He knew that simply slaying the creature would accomplish the same task, if he could but manage it, but Marrec tried one more tack.

Marrec said, "Surely you have had time enough since your binding to find a way to subvert the intent of your original task. Let us through Perhaps this last lapse will break the age-long binding that holds you here."

The demon laughed then said, "You are full of assumptions, human. As a matter of fact, I quite like it here. I am not bound quite so tightly as most of my brethren, and may even walk freely for a time in the world above. That is how I gained the Queen Abiding's token of control when the newcomer above at Dun Tharos's center foolishly lost it.

"And," added the creature, shining with red delight, "It's been far too long since I've been able to slake my thirst. I think I'll rather enjoy sucking the meat of each of your bones. I'll mount your skins in the Vault with the others."

Gunggari, freshly healed, was following the conversation closely. When the crowned demon lunged forward as he screeched the last portion of his speech, Gunggari was ready with his dizheri. The Oslander sounded a great, reverberating tone from his instrument of combat. The sound crashed forth, almost visible in the red-lit tunnel, its racing wave-front impacting the charging demon before the creature moved more than ten feet. Marrec

had seen that same trick lay out lesser creatures for full minutes. It was sufficient to cause Eschar to pause, growling.

"Gunny, Elowen, Ususi, take him out!" yelled Marrec.

He would have continued with more explicit directions, but the demon was suddenly next to him, somehow standing over the cleric without having moved physically through the intervening distance. Eschar tried to bite him, but Marrec blocked just in time with Justlance.

Another bite, two feints, and a head-butt nested with cruel horns—the cleric fell back with each attack, keeping Justlance between himself and the demon. He couldn't

afford to return an attack. The creature was too powerful, too strong. If Marrec opened up his defenses with an attack of his own, he didn't doubt Eschar would instantly expose Marrec's innards in a way sure to upset his friends. A few more seconds, and Ususi was sure to blast the creature...

A foot, dagger-clawed, streaked past his spinning spear. The kick lifted him and sent him rolling back tens of feet. The hard ground cudgeled him as he tumbled along the tunnel, his hands momentarily empty of the comforting haft of Justlance. Shadows narrowed his vision as his momentum was finally absorbed by the floor.

Justlance returned to his grip. The spear's return reminded him of the reason for the pain. He gasped and tried to sit, using Justlance as a prop. Any additional effort was beyond Marrec's power. Even his secret talent seemed distant and unavailable as he sought for any weapon to throw against the demon. He could only watch.

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Gunggari was done with using his dizheri as an instrument; he gripped his weapon in both tattooed hands and swung with a vengeance. The blows did little to slow Eschar's fury.

The elf hunter waded in, ready to try Dymondheart against a foe mightier than any she had before faced. As she closed on the demon, a light like the sun illuminated her and her blade, as if the daylight above had decided to ignore the intervening forest and rocky floor.

The demon flinched, focusing all its attention on Elowen, and snarled, "You have a potent weapon. I think FU kill you before you figure out how to really use it."

A clawed hand flashed out, as if to pluck the blade from Elowen's grasp, but she fell back, dragging the length of Dymondheart across Eschar's extended forearm. Where the blade touched, the skin peeled back, revealing an inky blackness. Eschar howled.

With its unflayed arm, the demon formed a great fist and pivoting its entire body, delivering a stunning hook to the

side of Elowen's head. The light surrounding Elowen flared up, became for an instant blinding, then faded to nothingness. Elowen, Eschar, and Gunggari stood for a moment, blinking, in the sudden return to near darkness natural to the tunnel. Of them all, Elowen was most surprised by her continued upright posture; by all rights, she should be splattered across the tunnel wall.

Eschar growled, said, "Already learned a few things, eh? Not enough!"

It lunged again, completely ignoring Gunggari, whose efforts were becoming frenzied. Elowen brought up Dymondheart; it seemed strangely dull and heavy. No light played along its length. Whatever it had just done to save Elowen from the demon's first blow had exhausted the blade's elan.

Eschar didn't at first recognize Dymondheart's lowered vitality, and despite his tough words, he seemed oddly tentative for such a hulking atrocity. The demon threw just a few quick, probing attacks that Elowen managed to deflect along the length of her disturbingly heavy blade.

Eschar's single-minded attention on the elf hunter finally paid off for Gunggari. The tattooed warrior wound up then swung, putting all the weight of his body behind the blow. The edge of his dizheri connected squarely under Eschar's jaw with a sound that could only herald breaking bone. Eschar's scream was high and piercing.

Ususi finally made her presence known, too. She had studied the fight, trying to gauge which of her powers might be most effective. Not completely unschooled in the ways of demons, the wizard knew that evils as obviously potent as Eschar were often resistant to magical attack. What would blast a mortal foe into a stain of blood and splintered bone might wash off a demon of Eschar's caliber like rain.

She could change the environment itself with her craft, which was something even powerful demons had to contend with.

Ususi drew the Wand of Citrine Force, drawing a glowing

yellow symbol in the air. As she "inked" the last stroke of the symbol, it pulsed once then sped unerringly at Eschar. At the last second Eschar looked up, his eyes widening, but the symbol was upon him. Moments before touching the demon's flesh, the symbol flashed into a thick, billowing puff of icy vapor. The demon tried to backpedal, but the vapor enveloped him completely. An instant later, the vapor froze solid, creating a disquieting, asymmetrical block of yellow ice in which Eschar was caught like a fly in amber.

The Queen Abiding wasn't the only demon bound by cold below Dun Tharos.

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Later, after Gunggari returned Marrec's earlier healing by way of his Nentyarch-given satchel, Marrec approached the block of ice.

"Where'd Eschar go?" he asked, his stomach tightening.

Everyone rushed over to look into the ice. A hollow space cratered the center of the ice, but the exterior of the block was unbroken. Eschar was no longer caught.

Ususi said, "He is a powerful demon. I could not bind him spiritually, only physically. He has the power to move himself from place to place; he said the same thing earlier."

Elowen groaned. She said, "Does this mean we're going to have to face that abyssal bastard again?"

Ususi responded, "If he continues to guard the Sighing Vault, then yes. Eschar yet bars our way."

Fallon worried. Doubt gnawed at him like a vicious rodent, turning his stomach sour. All his dreams of power, conquest, and comeuppance paid to his fellows in Yeshelmaar had become pale things, the goals a child might hold dear, not a man. As he tramped on through the maze of ancient summoning stones, senseless traps, and chambers whose purpose he could not divine, the darkness whispered only one thing to him. The message was bleak: Fallon was a minor, expendable little player in a drama that had little use for him once his part was played.

The pain of the Rotting Man's touch also continued to plague him, making all his thoughts slow and captious.

It hadn't been that way while he was under Anammelech's wing. The blightlord had nurtured Fallon's tiny imaginings, coaxing petty

daydreams into an all-out betrayal. For some reason, Fallon had believed that the promised rewards would make it all worth while. That shroud of comforting belief had been stripped from his eyes by his contact with the Talontyr.

Fallon was no fool. At least, he didn't like to think so. Perhaps Anammelech had just as little use for him, but fed Fallon's ego merely to bring him more fully into the camp of Dun Tharos. The coin the blightlord paid the elf for his reports of the doings in the Nentyarch's court was also head-turning.

It all had come to this. He had a date with a servitor of an evil goddess. He wondered how he could have ever been such a fool.

Sliding between sleeping demons and past the defenses of ancient Nar conjuries didn't aid his disposition. Fallon was a skipping stone and Under-Tharos the water; he could sense the ever broadening wake he left behind; his and Ash's rapid passage enlivened defenses long dormant and woke creatures trapped for centuries in deathless slumber. Doors that gaped open and unmoving allowed him unrestricted access, but after he passed, he could hear echoes as they slammed shut, as if embarrassed they had allowed his unrestricted passage so easily, determined not to make the same mistake twice. He didn't fully understand why the doors, the yawning traps, and the slumbering horrors were not already energized. Perhaps it was the doing of the Talontyr, whose power had reached out and calmed the surface in preparation for the elf's passage. Once past, the calm broke. As long as Fallon could keep skipping ahead of the storm, he remained safe.

He supposed Elowen and her sad Crew were even then meeting the first of the things he had aroused with his

passage. At least he could take some small comfort in knowing that his pursuers would fall ever further behind and probably be slain outright in the bargain. Of course, they were merely trying to do what was right, a course he had abandoned long ago to his present detriment. It occurred to him that morals might have more behind them than mere 'happiness and light.'

He gripped Ash's hand again, pulling the child along behind. As always, she gave no resistance. She never cried, or for that matter, even bruised. A pang of guilt, unfamiliar, assailed him. Didn't he care about the unresponsive child and her eventual fate, likely horrifying? Later, if he had a minute to spare, he would investigate that feeling, despite its sudden unwelcome appearance, but he had to spend all his effort on staying ahead of the waking wave behind him. He worried that his wave of disruption would crest, and finally catch him up before he made it all the way through.

He considered the shape he'd seen in the very first chamber, a shape caught in the ice. He gagged then shuddered when he recalled a single eye opening way back in the cold, before he turned tail and fled deeper.

A luminescence he had only half noted earlier was growing stronger as he approached. It had a pale, green, washed out look to it, as if the light were somehow weary. Its light was stronger than the radiance provided by his hooded lantern.

"That's worrying," he said aloud to Ash. The light was the first he'd seen since entering Under-Tharos. He wondered if something had awakened ahead of him.

He turned to the girl. "You know, maybe we ought to reconsider our path, eh? I wonder if I just ran for the surface now..."

Without warning, the pain in Fallon's head spiked. He cried aloud, clutching at his head, stumbling, sending his lantern tumbling. It was like a fire raged behind his eyes. His mind was on fire. He could feel his will to resist, his personality, his very essence begin to smolder in metaphorical heat.

He grunted, squeezing his forehead all the harder, trying to wring the pain away. The pain redoubled. The realization struck Fallon that the impetus implanted by the Rotting Man was more than mere direction; it was a malicious presence intent on hollowing him out from the inside, leaving a physical husk, a husk capable of accomplishing only tasks set for it by the Talontyr.

"No, leave me my mind!" he screamed, but as relentlessly as the tide receding, his personality crumbled under the repeated hammer strikes from within.

Memories of his upbringing at the hands of his kind sires flared and died. His time spent in training as a hunter under the cool green leaves crumbled. His brief love for an elven maid of surpassing beauty was stripped from him. What had she told him? "Oh, but for the piece of my heart you have stolen with your tender kisses..." No, it was gone; he couldn't remember. Weeping at his loss, the knowledge even that his memory was crumbling began to flame and wither. His first contacts by Anammelech, who seemed so innocent at first, and all his later betrayals spiraled into darkness. Everything was taking on a burning redness where there was no room any longer for what had once called itself Fallon.

Then came something new.

Amidst the scarlet flames, a point of pure white light glimmered. With the white light came surcease from the agony and a foothold against the erosion of Fallon's mind. The white light grew, faster and faster, and where it touched the pain was extinguished. Fallon felt his personality shuffling back from the precipice to which it had been forced. Finally, the attack ceased, and with it the pain broke. The compulsion was defeated.

There was Ash, standing closer than she had before. The girl rested the back of her hand lightly against Fallon's forehead. Then she pulled back, a glimmer of interest in her eyes gradually dulling back to their customary somnolence.

The child's touch had saved him.

When his strength was recovered, Fallon considered his options. The pain was completely gone. His mind was made whole again. In the aftermath of the Rotting Man's treachery and in the face of his salvation at Ash's intercession, the elf decided it was time to think about his future.

He would abandon his instructions from the Rotting Man. He would reverse himself, despite all the steps he'd taken, each step stretching back in tiny increments, in sum sufficient to propel him to where he sat, back propped up against some forgotten Nar tomb, the child he had kidnapped sitting nearby, and a foul green light from the corridor ahead painting everything a sickening shade.

What could be the consequence of one more bond broken when he had already severed his loyalty to the noble Nentyarch? Fear of the Rotting Man's displeasure couldn't be discounted, but Fallon had a hard time imagining what the Rotting Man could do to him that was worse than what had just been attempted. Losing himself was more than the elf could bear. The Rotting Man had miscalculated, or more likely, the Rotting Man hadn't known that the child had the capacity to neutralize his foul power.

Where could he go now? He couldn't go back through the hallways and dark passages from which he'd come. He'd alerted too many ancient horrors, rattled the cages of too many bound demons dating back to Narfell's preeminence. To turn back into the face of that storm would be little different than acceding to the Rotting Man's desires. Either way, he was sure he'd end up dead and his soul forfeit in the bargain.

If he couldn't go back, he'd have to go forward, but too straight a path would deliver him into the Rotting Man's hands. Actually, he recalled that a blightlord had been dispatched to meet him. Damanda. If he stayed on his present course, his meeting with her would occur within the day.

He'd have to strike off in a direction of his own choosing—a

scary thought. The dungeons of Under-Tharos were legendary, both for their demonic contents and their extensive size, but perhaps he could scent a passage to the surface.

"You ready to get out of here, girl?" Fallon asked the child, his voice gentler than was his wont. "I'd give a lot to see the sun again."

He stood. The lantern he'd dropped had miraculously not broken nor even leaked too much; it was of Yeshelmaar make after all. It didn't take but a moment to pick it up. Taking Ash's hand, he turned down a dark side passage to the left that was not marked in his mind.

The green light from down the wide corridor flickered wildly, as if in the throes of a tantrum. After a time, the emerald light returned to its originally sickly hue, waiting, or more properly described, lurking.

Elowen ran a finger down the length of Dymondheart. The blade still seemed sluggish. Light failed to ripple along its length as it had when she'd first unsheathed it. She worried the vigor it held before would not return.

"Should we press on or rest?" asked Marrec. The cleric stood peering down the passage which they all believed opened on the Sighing Vault.

Elowen sheathed her blade, hoping her worry was unfounded.

"We should rest," snapped Ususi. "I've depleted my energies too much today and need time to prepare myself, especially if we must face Eschar once more."

Marrec nodded at the mage.

The tattooed southlander said, "The demon is retreating. We should press our advantage and pursue it immediately."

Elowen spoke up, "We barely faced it down here. If Ususi is tapped, I doubt our ability to face it again." As she spoke, she rested her hand protectively along Dymondheart's sheath.

Marrec rubbed his forehead and said, "Time's not on our

side. Fallon could be hours away from delivering Ash to his bastard of a master."

"If he hasn't already," opined Ususi.

Marrec regarded her with a sour look then said, "We've got to finish our business with the queen as quickly as possible, so we can move on to what's really important."

"Do we?" asked Gunggari. He approached their demonic chaperone, which remained immobile since Eschar's command. Gunggari nudged it with the edge of his dizheri. It failed to respond.

"Well, we did make a deal..." began Marrec.

"With a demon!" interrupted Ususi. "Don't you think this queen, whatever her true infernal name, will bend or break our bargain at the very first opportunity?"

Marrec stated, "Two wrongs do not a right make."

Ususi threw up her hands. "You can't 'wrong' a demon."

Elowen tried to deflect what seemed a mounting argument, holding up one hand. "The Rotting Man is more powerful, surely, than either Eschar or the Queen Abiding."

"So, what, we have no chance? Is that your point?" sniped Ususi. "No..."

"Her point," said Gunggari, still poking at the unmoving ice demon, "is that we may find an ally in the queen if we release her. Right?" Gunggari grinned at the elf, his teeth improbably white against his dark skin.

"Almost," responded Elowen. "Like Ususi says, we can't forget the Queen Abiding is a fiend, and fiends cannot be trusted, but this demon is desperate. Who knows how many thousands of years she's been trapped down here in these ruins? If she wasn't desperate, certainly she wouldn't have arranged for creatures not completely under her control to find and bring to her the one item, which apparently has the ability to control her actions."

Gunggari nodded slowly. Marrec adopted a considering look; Ususi frowned.

"I propose," continued Elowen, "that before we return this

token to the queen, we avail ourselves of its power. We use the queen to bolster our strength against the Rotting Man, through her token of control."

Ususi, still frowning, said, "A tool such as this can turn in its owner's hand. It would be too risky,"

"Don't talk to me about risky," snorted Elowen. "This demon had us at her mercy and forced us to agree to retrieve her trinket. That was risky. Merely being in Under-Tharos is a risk most would never countenance. Sure it's a risk to try to force the queen's aid, but if she can be redeemed in any way, she can do some good for a change, even if it is against her nature. This token gives us the edge we need and should provide us a margin of safety that mere agreements, backed up only by word, lack."

"There is risk; there is such a thing as a soul hazard," said Ususi.

Gunggari noted, "Ususi, certainly you've heard tell of evil creatures who occasionally do the work of good?"

Elowen noticed that Marrec colored slightly at Gunggari's words. The Oslander had struck a nerve somehow, but she didn't know why.

Gunggari continued, "If we are to foil the Rotting Man's plan, renew Lurue, and survive to tell the tale, we'll need help. The queen may be all we have."

Ususi frowned but said nothing further.

Elowen grinned, said, "Great. Let's see about getting our chaperone out of his fugue, then, shall we?"

Ususi looked at Marrec, waiting. The cleric shook his head but said, "Free the ice demon if you can, Ususi."

Ususi uttered a quick word under her breath, but she began to mutter and scribe runes on the dark surface of the unmoving ice demon. The cleric stood nearby, his eyes narrowed, apparently having some sort of internal debate as he watched the wizard work. Elowen considered Marrec.

She rarely understood humans, but she had known elves

similar to Marrec, dutiful, but at turns playful; often vocal, but sometimes taciturn. The cleric's devotion to his absent goddess verged on a lover's attention for his cherished bride, which struck Elowen as a bit disturbing, though she'd seen it in others. In Marrec, whose goddess no longer daily bolstered him with contact and clarity of purpose, the devotion ran the risk of becoming merely a sad habit of thought. Of course, if they were successful, perhaps that would all change, as the Nentyarch had hinted.

Ususi had mentioned to her while they walked the tunnels of Under-Tharos that Marrec had admitted to some secret talent, though the human was somehow ashamed of it. That latest bit of gossip was most intriguing. She wondered if she'd get the chance to see Marrec show his ability forth.

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The passage was blocked ahead.

A pale stone face jutted from the wall. The face was massive; the tunnel passage was just large enough to contain it. The face seemed human but wrenched with devilish glee; at least it seemed to be leering. It was much eroded by water, and stalactites dripped from its cheekbones and brows. The face's mouth was wide open, and its tongue, also crumbling stone, lolled out like a carpet. The mouth was stopped up with an iron door, rusted and stained black. A single pull-ring hung from the door's center. To Marrec's eyes, the door appeared as if it had been closed for centuries.

Marrec asked Gunggari, "Did we get off the track?"

The tattooed warrior shook his head, saying, "No, Eschar came from this way. See? These rust-flakes on the ground show the door has been only recently closed, abruptly."

"Doesn't he magically flit around down here?" Ususi answered from behind, "He may only have limited range."

The cleric supposed he could see a couple of flakes. He trusted Gunggari to be right. Time was wasting, and they had to move. "Then that's where we are going, too." He walked up to the door, laid hold of the ring, and pulled.

"Wait!" yelled Elowen, at the same time as Ususi, though the mage was less polite in her request than the elf.

The door didn't budge despite his effort. He wished that the gloves given him by the Nentyarch weren't drained.

"I said, wait," said Elowen, at his shoulder, pulling him back.

"We have to watch for traps."

Marrec shrugged, irritable. "Eschar went this way. Beyond lies the Sighing Vault."

"Not precisely true," intoned Ususi from further back, who had moved the opposite direction of Elowen when Marrec tried the door. "If there is a vault, we may have to run a gauntlet of protections to get to its center."

Marrec's face reddened. He could not justify his unthinking action, pulling on the door so recklessly, so he said nothing.

Gunggari finally noted, "This door, at least, appears to be free of defenses, but it is stuck."

"Give me a hand here, Gunny," requested Marrec. He and the Oslander both heaved on the metal door. It didn't even creak, though both men groaned with the effort.

Something cold and odiferous shouldered him out of the way. Gunggari, similarly jostled, danced back and grasped his dizheri; the ice demon had slid up silently while their attention was on the door. Ususi had managed to free it from its compulsion of inaction.

Their icy chaperone reared back, its paw-like hands balled into great fists. With a grand release, the fists swung and smashed square into the center of the iron door. The door blew off its hinges with a screech of metal, a shower of sparks, and a clamorous crash of metal on stone. The sound continued to echo up and down the corridor for several seconds before dying away.

Marrec said, "Our guide may prove more useful than I had supposed."

The creature leered and giggled at Marrec.

"No doubt about it," agreed Elowen.

Marrec felt his attitudes shifting slightly. "We can't keep

calling you 'creature;' what is your name?" Marrec asked the queen's envoy.

The beast considered then rasped, "The Victorious Slayer of Compassion."

"We'll call you Victorious for short," responded Marrec without losing a beat.

The creature didn't react to the cleric's simplification of its name, except to cough up a phlegm-coated chunk of stained ice, but it did that sometimes.

Marrec shoved his spear through the opening of the mouth of the great bust. The eldritch glow on the spear's tip illuminated the chamber beyond.

The square space revealed was covered in gray, peeling plaster. Across the width of the room was an unlit exit, but in between, the plaster that had not crumbled was covered in paintings strangely bright and vivid. Scenes, figures, and glyphs adorned the room in no apparent order. The visual jumble covered the walls but also the floor and ceiling, creating a disquieting mosaic of disturbing images: a dragon eating a virginal maiden, a plague of worms infesting a screaming man, a seascape where a great tentacled monstrosity pulled down a ship, a giant roasting bound prisoners on a spit...

Marrec looked away, disgusted. He studied the room, trying not to focus on the painted scenes. Nothing moved, and nothing stirred in the empty exit. Crumbling plaster lay in clumps and drifts across the floor, thankfully obscuring some of the images.

"This way," said the cleric. He didn't like the look of the preternaturally bright images. He said, "Try to step only on the crumbled plaster." He followed his own advice, treading carefully, sometimes jumping from one island of powdery gray dust to the next.

Victoricus followed Marrec. The demon surprised the cleric by following his direction, instead of sliding across the room as Marrec had expected. Perhaps the demon was bound to

serve him? More likely, it knew something about the images in the plaster that it hadn't divulged.

Gunggari followed, then Ususi, and last Elowen. As Gunggari reached the bare stone hallway where Marrec and the demon waited, Ususi reached the center of the chamber. The mage paused.

"That's interesting," said Ususi, looking at a collection of arcane sigils that painted the floor near her feet. "These are Nar characters, but the alphabet is strangely reminiscent of Imaskari letters."

"Interesting, but not important now," opined Elowen, right behind the mage, "Let's go."

. "Just a moment," said Ususi, as she bent and touched a finger to one the glyphs, tracing its lines.

"Oh, shards," breathed the wizard, then she yelled, "It's got me!" •

It was true. Where her finger had touched the image, a meniscus of paint stretched to maintain contact. It did more than stretch; it pulled. Ususi was yanked forward, her finger, her hand, and her forearm swallowed into the floor. It was as if the ground were a voracious liquid, not hard plaster. Elowen caught at Ususi's other flailing hand and the mage's forward momentum into the floor was arrested.

Marrec, standing on the other edge, saw that where the wizard's arm disappeared into the floor, new color sprang to life. It was as if a new painting were rising up from the floor, there all along, but only then becoming visible. So far, it revealed only a feminine arm, which terminated at the point where Ususi knelt, struggling to pull herself from the floor's grip.

"Pull her out of there," yelled Marrec. "It's eating her, or... or something."

The cleric hustled back into the chamber, determined to remain only on the mounds of crumbled plaster. Because of his, the demon's, and Gunggari's earlier traversal, the mounds were somewhat scattered, and it was more difficult

for him to get across quickly without touching the painted floor.

"Gods, it's got a grip on her," complained Elowen, her voice tight, as she pulled on Ususi's other arm. If anything, she lost ground, and Ususi was pulled forward, nearly her entire arm swallowed, her straining head falling dangerously close to the absorptive surface.

Marrec arrived, clamped both his hands on the free arm, lending his strength to Elowen's. They both heaved. Ususi groaned as her bones crackled with the strain. With a sucking pop, they pulled the wizard clear. All three of them very nearly stumbled and fell backward, but in the end they managed to retain their footing on the crumbled plaster.

Breathing hard, his hand still on Ususi's arm, Marrec murmured, "Come on." He led Ususi across. Elowen followed after. They assembled safely on the opposite side of the painted chamber.

Ususi turned to Marrec, "That is another life I owe you."

A smile ghosted his lips in return. "I'm glad I'm building up credit. I may need to call in that marker before we get clear of the Vault."

CHAPTER 22

Fallon had failed to keep the schedule. Damanda tapped midnight black nails on lacquered armor just as dark. Green highlights played along her silhouette. The fluctuating emerald glow emerged from an ominous point further down the ruined hallway where Damanda and her retinue stood.

The pulsing, ravenous glow was the light of the Lurker in the Middle, and by its intensity, it was clear the entity had not snared Fallon. It was still hungry. Damanda, for all her might, had no desire to meet the Lurker face to face—or whatever passed for a Lurker's face.

Fallon's absence was troubling. The Rotting Man's compulsion should have cored the elf's mind and marched him dutifully into the Lurker's grasp, leaving the idiot child for Damanda to collect at her leisure. No child, no Fallon, no

triumphant return to the Close with the Talontyr's hard-sought prize in tow.

Worry puckered tentative steps across her stomach. It did not do to disappoint the Rotting Man. His plans were coming to fruition. She doubted she could survive being a barrier to his goal, intentional or not.

That's why she would not fail, despite Fallon's troubling absence.

The blightlord considered her retinue. Anammelech had preferred oozes, and bumbling Gameliel his corrupted forest creatures. Herself, she had a penchant for the undead, especially those that delighted haunting the night—and the ever dark corridors of these ruined Nar conjuries. From all the cold, animate servants she had to choose from, she had selected her four favorites to accompany her into Under-Tharos to collect Fallon, just in case there was trouble. Indeed, trouble had found her. They would have to discover Fallon's whereabouts.

Heavily tattooed, poem-spewing Bonehammer rested on the shaft of the weapon from which he derived his name. Bonehammer's moon-white skin peeked out from between indelibly inked scenes of depraved obscenity. His blank eyes regarded the Lurker's glow, measuring.

Absalme, elf thin, gowned in thin white leather, hummed a tuneless dirge, awaiting Damanda's next command. Her fingers played along the length of a flute of fused humanoid vertebrae.

The contorted, constantly twisting frame of Ezekial was draped in dull black cloth, hiding the extent of his deformity. Because of his nature, Ezekial's posture hid a secret assassin's strength, redoubled by his deathless spirit.

Finally there was diminutive Lex with her tomes, scrolls, and wands. A shock of purple hair grew like fungus on Lex's graceful skull.

Lex grinned, showing her cruelly pointed canines, and said, "Some other demon got your elf before he even reached

here, eh?"

"Perhaps. It is what we must discover. Ezekial!" "Yes, Mistress?" creaked he of cloaks, daggers, and teeth.

"Find the missing elf, or better yet, the girl-child he has with him."

Ezekial bent, so precipitously and shockingly that those unused to his contortions might have thought that he had broken and his top half toppled. His nose a mere whisper above the floor, he began to sniff. Sniffing, he shuffled away from the greenish light, back along the way Fallon should have come.

Damanda and the other vampires followed.

CHAPTER 23

([racks riddled the stone walls of the passage. Over the eons, trickling water had nearly dissolved away some sections, though a lingering malign influence restricted the damage from being total.

Marrec pressed forward, hoping to come to the core of the Sighing Vault, but paranoid that each new shadow hid an ambush by Eschar. His companions stepped cautiously behind him, Victorious bringing up the rear.

Ususi had bolstered the ice demon with magic that should make it more resistant to instant neutralization by Eschar. That would be important were they to face Eschar again.

Echoes of their footsteps sometimes leaped ahead, causing Marrec to pause suspiciously. Marrec said, "There is an open area ahead by the sound of it." Whispers of his voice echoed back.

They pressed ahead, and the corridor emptied into a vast space. Shapes glowed with their own foul light, tumbled under a great subterranean ceiling. Pale domes, cracked sarcophagi, and possibly thousands of clay vessels, earthenware containers, and other containers lay scattered and broken around the chamber, most half buried in millennial dust. It was impossible to tell how many thousands more containers lay completely buried.

Even the slightest sound sent echoes scurrying and whispering across the chamber.

Victoricus intoned, "The Sighing Vault."

Ususi asked, "How can we find the token amidst this morass? It would take years."

"I smell it," the ice demon said, almost as if surprised.

It began to slide forward, passing the outermost vessels of the gargantuan pile. Casual inspection showed that the chests, vessels, and pots that were broken were empty of all content.

"Stay alert," said Marrec, gripping Justlance. "Eschar's got to be here, waiting." He followed on the demon's heels. Gunggari followed him, next Ususi, and Elowen took up the rear, guarding their flank.

They passed out into the great cavern, passing between larger vessels of stone and iron so large that they were like windowless, doorless buildings. Narrow "streets" of clear space wound through that city of silence, and Victoricus followed one such lane to the center of the tumbled pile.

Some of the vessels were carved with faces, bodies, skulls, demonic glyphs, and more depraved symbology. It was clear that many Nar treasures and secrets resided there in their hundreds.

Marrec said quietly, "Eschar's been a busy collector over the centuries."

Ususi responded, "That or he happened upon a dumping ground of failed Nar experiments. I doubt there is much of any use here. I can't detect any magic in any of these." She waved her hand over a field of crooked, half-shattered clay pots.

"Looking for goodies?" wondered Marrec.

"I'm looking for anything that we can use to our advantage," huffed the wizard.

Ahead of Marrec, Victoricus slid to a halt before a salt-white dome. They had traveled several hundred yards, picking their way through the vault field, and Marrec decided they

might well be in the center of the cavern.

The ice demon pointed to the vault and said, "The Queen Abiding's token lies within."

Apprehensive that Eschar was watching them, so close to their goal, they spread out around the dome, looking for a door, window, or even a crack large enough to provide entry. The dome, like many of the smaller containers surrounding it, seemed sealed but unbroken. As far as Marrec could determine, the dome was carved of a single piece of limestone. A line of symbols ran around the periphery of the dome. That was all.

Dissatisfied with the time they were spending, Marrec grunted, "I suppose these are in the language of ancient Narfell?" He pointed to the symbols. He couldn't understand why Eschar hadn't already attacked them. His neck hair continually prickled, but no threat materialized to justify his tension. Yet.

Ususi studied the symbols. She read, translating, "Once for the First; Twice for the Archduke; Thrice for the Viscount; Four revolutions for the dual lords; Five for the Prince, Six for the Hag; Seven for the Seventh; Eight for the Eighth, and Nine for the King."

"That doesn't sound like a healthy litany," noted Elowen, looking around nervously.

"It does have the sound of a summoning, doesn't it," mused Ususi.

"Is it?" asked Marrec.

The wizard shrugged, said, "I do not believe so, no, but it does remind me of something." She pulled upon the flaps of one of her voluminous side satchels in which she carried various slim tomes and parchments covered in crabbed runes, sorted through the contents, then pulled forth a slender volume bound in blue leather. The edges were crumbling, and the symbols were faded, though they seemed similar to those on the dome.

Ususi explained, "This tome is banned in some cities of

Faerun, if you can believe it. Some people don't understand that to fight demons and devils you have to first recognize them." .

Marrec's eyes widened. He asked, "You carry a tome of demonology?"

The wizard said, "I carry many bits of knowledge. You never know when you'll stumble upon something better left alone, but how would you know it, unless you can identify it as such? Ah hah!" her finger, scanning lines, stabbed at an entry.

Ususi said, "The writing on the dome refers to the Lords of Hell itself."

All stood silent a moment, digesting the mage's pronouncement. Finally Marrec said, "So... what now? Are we dealing with something far beyond our ability? A gate straight into Hell? I hate these damned Nar sorceries."

"I'm not sure, but I suspect it is a riddle, merely playing with the names of Hell. If we can answer the riddle, I predict we can open the dome and reveal the queen's token, along with whatever else Eschar stores here."

"And Eschar himself, no doubt," muttered Gunggari.

"Hold on; why devils?" asked Marrec. "Aren't the Nar known for the demons they kept in thrall?"

Ususi replied, "Demons, devils, 'loths... the Nar were not picky in those creatures they pressed into service. We say demons, but the Nar embraced a much wider swath of foulness."

Elowen wondered, "These devils are called the First, the Second, and so on?"

"Yes, well, that is only part of their name. For instance, a devil named Bel is Lord of the First. The Lord of the Second is Dispater."

Marrec studied the dome for any activity following the utterance of the names. Nothing visibly changed. He said, "You said something about revolutions. Does that have something to do with the position of the moons around

Faerun?" Marrec was rightfully proud of his astronomical knowledge.

"Maybe, but that would severely limit the times Eschar could get into his centermost stash," said Ususi.

"Though he can flit into and out of spaces magically," noted Gunggari.

Ususi nodded but said, "Let's try this—walk around the dome nine times. During each 'revolution' I'll call out the name of a lord of Hell, from the First to the Ninth."

Elowen said, "That seems a little simple."

Ususi frowned.

Marrec said, "I'm not sure I want to traipse through some ritual that involves the naming of devils."

The wizard said, "It's the only way to gain entry, unless it doesn't work, of course."

Marrec finally nodded.

Once they gathered together, two by two, including chilly Victoricus, they began to walk, counterclockwise. A wide space in the earth surrounding the dome seemed to provide an ideal path. The mage walked in the lead, holding her slim blue tome open to the list of fiendish names, purportedly the names of the nine lords of Hell.

Just before they finished their first circuit, Ususi called out, "Bel, Lord of the First!"

Marrec couldn't see any change, but they continued to walk. On their second pass, Ususi cried, "Archduke Dispater, Lord of the Second!"

The third time around, the mage called, "Viscount Mammon, Lord of the Third!"

Small bits of dust puffed up from various parts of the vaultfield surrounding the dome.

Ususi called, "Lady Fierna and Archduke Belial, Lords of the Fourth!" on the fourth circular trip.

The cavern rolled slightly, as if in the grip of a slight tremor.

"You know, this could work," said Elowen.

Next, "Prince Levistus, Lord of the Fifth," then "The Hag

Countess, Lord of the Sixth!"

Following that sixth revolution a wind picked up, blowing dust and grit into the air across the cavern. Marrec gripped Justlance apprehensively as the visibility worsened.

They continued through their seventh circuit. Visibility fell to nothing as the wind whipped up more fiercely. Ususi named "Archduke Baalzebul, Lord of the Seventh."

Groans and cries, screeches and howls broke out after Ususi named "Mephistopheles, Lord of the Eighth." Something bit Marrec on the ankle, but when he looked, nothing was there. They all hurried through the final circuit.

Ususi, her voice hoarse from the dust, finally said "King Asmodeus, Lord of the Nine Hells!" Marrec itched to plug his ears, afraid to sully his mind with names he'd prefer not to know.

Just like that the dust pulled back as if a veil drawn aside. Marrec exclaimed, "That's new!" as they came around the dome for the ninth and last time.

A door-sized opening pierced the dome's side, looking for all the world as if it had always been there, and from the doorway issued a shape.

The forward-protruding crown of horns on its forehead preceded its slavering mouth and lupine body. As before, the sense of evil surrounding Eschar was palpable, at least to Marrec who, as a servant of Lurue, had some experience in confronting otherworldly malevolence.

Eschar pointed at Victoricus as it had before, saying "Be still!"

Victoricus shuddered. Yellow light flickered across its form, but instead of freezing, Victoricus tittered and charged the horned demon.

Ususi breathed, "My protection held."

Victoricus smashed into Eschar like an icy fist. Eschar shuddered but weathered the charge. Their chaperone's cold claws left great rents down Eschar's face and side.

Elowen charged in, her living sword strangely dull. Where

she scored hits on the horned demon, no blood was drawn. Eschar laughed, almost as if slightly relieved. He continued to focus his attention on Victoricus, obviously more afraid of the servant of the Queen Abiding than all of the rest of them.

Gunggari came up on the demon's left, wielding his dizheri. He landed a few hearty blows.

Marrec used Gunggari's distraction to launch Justlance straight and true. It penetrated Eschar's side. The demon let loose a roar of such intensity that it ruined the spell Ususi had been incanting.

"Enough," muttered Eschar.

His foul breath, already hot, became a flame in truth. The coiling, white-hot fire focused itself on Victoricus, who made as if to turn, maybe to run. They would never know; when the flame touched their chaperone, its body flashed instantly from ice directly to steam, foregoing liquid. A black mist whirled away, leaving only a damp stain on the cavern floor.

Marrec held forth his hand, waiting for Justlance to return. Instead, Eschar plucked the bloodied spear from its side. The demon shouldn't have been able to do that. He shouldn't... his spear flashed back through the air, arrowing for Marrec's heart. He fell forward, trying to dive, but simply tripped. The tip of Justlance scored the back of his armor.

Ususi was beside him. She said, "Get inside the dome and get the token. Command the queen to aid us. We'll distract this whoreson of the Nine Hells."

So saying, she shot a narrow beam of energy directly into Eschar's eyes. It caused the demon, which had grabbed Elowen by one leg and begun squeezing, to cry out and loose the elf. It clapped both hands to its eyes, rubbing furiously while continuing to bellow.

Marrec used the moment to slip past Eschar into the dome.

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Elowen's leg bled freely where Eschar had squeezed with its

clawed hands. She saw Marrec slip past while the demon continued to rub its eyes. Time to provide further distraction.

She darted to the demon's left, at the same time drawing Dymondheart along the inside of her foe's overlarge knee. The living bladed sliced deep through tendon and sinew. Had her own leg not pained her so, she wondered if she could not have ended the fight right there, but hampered as she was, she had to settle for what she could get. Eschar's new scream of pain seemed a good reward

Then Elowen noted that the tissue was reknitting, disappearing before her eyes. She yelled to Gunggari to her left, "His wounds are healing!"

Gunggari, who continued to batter the demon, seemingly to little effect, scowled more deeply. At the very least, he was keeping the demon off balance with the force he imparted with each blow.

Its eyes finally clearing from Ususi's magical blast, the demon glanced at Elowen then kicked her. She fell into a bed of small clay vessels that were half-buried in ash. Her mouth filled with a sharp, metallic taste as she choked on the cloud of dust her flailing body fountained into the air. Blinking her eyes to clear them, she looked up to see that Eschar stood over her. The demon must have decided to be done with her once and for all.

Gunggari jostled and vibrated the demon from behind, but his war club lacked sufficient magical charge to fully penetrate the demon's magical hide. The Oslander wasn't going to save her.

The demon slashed a claw down upon the prone elf. Elowen flipped her sword, on which she had retained her grasp despite her short arc through the air, into a high block and held it with both hands.

Any other weapon might have shattered, but the living blade, despite its strange diminishment, held true. Elowen felt her arms buckle beneath the impact, but the claws failed

to rake her. That time.

A wall of yellow instantly grew between Elowen and her attacker. It was Ususi, who once again called upon the power of her precious wand. The elf hunter used the seconds the wall bought her to scramble to her feet.

As Elowen rushed around the side of the wall, she heard a great yell. It was the demon. Gunggari had managed to crack the demon on the back of the head hard enough to get its attention.

Eschar whirled and advanced upon the retreating Oslander. Eschar growled, "If I can't suck the marrow from the elFs bones, man meat will have to satisfy ... until I catch you all." The demon breathed in deeply then exhaled. Again, the very air ignited with hellish fire, sending a snaking tendril of white-orange flame in Gunggari's direction.

Gunggari dodged aside. Though the flame failed to fall full upon him, the backwash of heat still brought blisters to his skin and choked a grunt of pain from his lips. Worse, he dropped his dizheri.

Eschar paused then, a slightly puzzled expression looking out of place on the demon's horrendous visage. He said, "Wait. You numbered one more..."

Screaming in sudden fury, the horned demon whirled and raced toward the open mouth of the white dome.

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Marrec ran along a narrowing corridor of egg-shell white. Like the inside of a conch shell, the corridor seemed to whirl ever closer to some still-hidden center. Marrec became certain that the dome's interior was somewhat larger than the exterior promised. The sounds of his friends' struggle against Eschar quickly faded behind him. Then the sounds of his muffled footfall on the hard surface competed only with the beat of surging blood in his ears as his heart hammered.

He nearly tripped when Justlance finally, tardily, materialized in his grip. Good, he needed the light that still radiated from its tip.

Marrec couldn't decide how many full circuits he'd made, each one smaller than the last, but he guessed about nine, when he came to the inmost chamber.

Also dome shaped, rising to a height of at least twenty feet, the chamber was mostly empty.

Nine pedestals graced the periphery of the circular room. The pedestals, equidistantly spaced, stood at the edges of a nine-pointed star inscribed in red across the floor. Most of the pedestals were empty, though each contained a hollow concavity, apparently sized to accept strangely shaped amulets, tools, or other implements that Marrec didn't want to spend time attempting to imagine.

Five of the pedestals contained items, though to the cleric's unpracticed eye it seemed that only one of those items was actually the object meant to be housed; none of the other objects fit its particular hollow, shelf, or hangar so snugly. It was a night black cloak, so dark that it seemed a void, which

was draped across a perfectly shaped hangar.

The other four items included a dagger made from a red talon, an orb of hazy green set in a golden ring, a sword seemingly forged of pale bone, and a chunk of white, translucent crystal in which something dark was caught.

What had the Queen Abiding said? "You'll know it when you see it" or some such.

He sprinted across the floor to the pedestal holding the crystal chunk. Hefting it, his fingers were immediately chilled, and condensation formed, dripping off his hand. He gazed into the object, studying that which was caught within. Marrec's eyes couldn't seem to focus on it. First a smear, then some great winged thing it seemed, then a wriggling worm, then back to a dark imperfection.

The crystal had to be it. He clutched it close. Marrec's eyes fell across the other items stored in the chamber, obviously precious bits gathered by Eschar. He suspected that all were tainted by association with the failed Nar race. Look what came of them for their congress with demons, he thought. With his single prize, he dashed from the room.

The cleric made to retrace his route, circling outward, but leaving the room immediately spit him into the great cavern. He stood before the open mouth of the dome at the center of the Sighing Vault a little off balance; Marrec's body thought it should be racing around in wider circles, as it had on entering the dome.

His eyes were filled with the form of Eschar, who was upon him.

Fallon nearly stumbled, his foot catching across the lintel of the dark room into which he pulled himself and Ash. He had a sense that something was following behind him. Too far to see and hear directly, but the elf could sense something closing on him. He hadn't heard or smelled anything specific or seen a betraying light, but a mixture of subtle clues colluded. The sum of those clues was inescapable, though

he knew most people would never know they had become quarry until too late. His sense was accurate enough for him to discern that that which hunted him was not the group sent out by the Nentyarch that had trailed him earlier through that thoroughly inexplicable extradimensional space. Fallon's pursuer was something far more implacable. After all, despite his betrayal of the Nentyarch, he was a hunter trained by the Circle of

Leth. His skills were considerable in their own right, even though their use was no longer sanctioned. Oh well, time for yet more unsanctioned activity, he decided.

Fallon adjusted the shade on his hooded lantern to a wider aperture, allowing the finger-thin gleam of light to widen to a cone of amber radiance. His elven eyes, sensitive beyond those of men, studied that which was revealed.

The side chamber glittered in the increased light. Some sort of white dust, like particles of salt, coated the floor, walls, and even the ceiling. Lumps under a powdery coating were scattered across the floor of the chamber. Most of the lumps were fist-sized, but a few were larger, half a foot across bigger. The largest was an elongated lump almost six feet long and a little over a foot wide, though it was tapered at each end.

Another exit poked through the far wall of the small chamber. The dusty covering seemed thicker over there.

Stepping carefully, Fallon approached the largest lump. Brushing away some of the coating, which shifted and flowed as if in truth sea salt, Fallon's suspicion was confirmed: a completely desiccated humanoid body, mummified and shrunken beneath an ancient cocoon of material. The elf doubted the whitish powder was salt in truth, but a remnant of something more insidious. He didn't have the stomach to investigate the identity of the smaller lumps.

He whispered to the girl, who still stood just inside the doorway, "Want to bet something nasty lives through

there?" Fallon gestured toward the small exit in the chamber where the white coating was thickest. Ash did not deign to respond.

Walking with practiced ease, Fallon sidled over to the exit. The beam of his lantern illuminated a short passage in which lay a snowy layer so thick that drifts completely covered the floor to a depth of at least six inches. Beyond the passage, the light revealed a wide expanse. His eyes narrowed, his breath coming in a short gasp when he registered movement in that far chamber—many, many somethings.

He breathed easier when, after a moment, it seemed that he had not disturbed the activity he'd probed with the lantern beam. A good thing—he guessed that it would be a lethal journey had he blundered through the drifts into the chamber. He and Ash would have to go back to the tunnel they had been initially traversing.

The inklings of a plan tickled him. Perhaps some misdirection was in order. That which pursued him had too easy a time of it, stalking a quarry too afraid to turn aside. Perhaps he would "turn aside" here, he thought. Fallon estimated he only had about fifteen minutes of grace, assuming that which tailed him didn't change its velocity.

The elf opened his pack, looking for the implements he would need to pull off his subterfuge.

The creature known as Ezekial swept ahead through the darkness, not hurrying, but like the tide when it changes, unstoppable. A predator by nature, a killer by predilection, and an assassin by trade, Ezekial tasted the essence of the fools that fled before him. One was an elf, that Ezekial could tell with only a sniff, though the elf had some skill in concealing its passage. However, with the elf's scent sighing through his nostrils, very little could put him off the trail.

The predator's eyes narrowed, as it intermittently sensed the other member of the duo he tracked. There was something in that scent that seemed to threaten Ezekial, in a manner

not unlike the eastern sky threatening to push back the night. He didn't know what to make of that, and had not Damanda commanded the chase, he might have decided to pass up that particular quarry.

But Damanda's command could not be denied. She was his mistress, his progenitor, his very existence. The blightlord's cruel domination was the closest thing Ezekial would ever know to devotion.

A confusion of scents hazed the passage ahead.

A side chamber gave off the main passage he traversed, like many he had previously passed, though without a valve or door to conceal its contents. The trail of his quarry led both ahead and into the chamber.

A crux of indecision; which trail was the most recent? A few sniffs revealed that the odor of life he followed like a beacon was stronger to his left. It wafted from the chamber, enticing him closer. He licked his lips; yes, there it was—blood. Blood had been spilled, and it was fresh. Ezekial frowned. He hoped he would not be robbed of the reward he had promised himself. It wouldn't be the first time quarry he chased through Under-Tharos fell victim to something more terrible than himself.

The scent milled indecisively throughout the chamber. Living creatures had only recently vacated that chamber, he felt confident, but which way had they gone? His eyes, functioning perfectly in the absolute darkness, focused on the chamber's only other exit. A fall of powder, like snow, spilled from it in shallow drifts.

Footprints tracked through the drifts, leading into the exit and through the tunnel beyond. The smell was so intense that Ezekial was certain his quarry was just minutes ahead, maybe seconds. When he heard the slight rustling from the chamber beyond the exit tunnel, he exulted. The quarry was trying to hide. Though the sounds were slight, the vampire's supernatural senses didn't miss much.

So strong was the smell, and so certain was Ezekial that the

rustling was the furtive sounds of those he sought, that he failed to note the strangely regular pattern of the footfalls and the way they did not make an impression deep enough to carry the weight of a full-grown humanoid or perhaps even that of a child.

Ezekial flitted ahead, bursting into the chamber beyond, a vicious grin on his inhuman features. He had to wade through the sea-salt-sized grains that covered the floor at an increasing depth as he moved forward. The raspy, white powder then reached his shins.

If his quarry hid in the chamber into which Ezekial burst, it was burrowed under the massive drifts of white that covered the floor, shrouded the walls, and dripped from the ceiling in strange stalactite-like formations. Only the center of the chamber was clear.

The central clearing, crater-like, held a nearly-black sphere about one foot in diameter. White lines, the same color white as the strange substance all around them, ran like imperfections through the globe. Without visible mechanism, the globe was slowly spinning on its shallow bed of pale salt.

Ezekial paused. Was the sound of the revolving sphere the sound he'd heard?

A moment later he realized not. The sound was that of the "salt" crystals themselves. Like a ripple sweeping away from a stone cast into water, the white motes first closest to the orb, then those further away, and so on, began to stir. They revealed themselves for what they really were, unfurling, Unfolding, and flexing.

Thousands, millions, maybe, of salt-white, tiny demon-lings filled the chamber. They were all drawing sudden animation from the orb, whose eye-like shape peered into Ezekial's mind.

The vampire had a single moment before the white mass of demonlings encompassed him, closing him into a hermetically sealed sarcophagus of sucking evil from which

there was no escape, not even for one such as him. He might have used that moment to slide his physical body into shifty vapor. Instead, he surprised himself by letting rip with a scream of terror—his first and last.

A cry, quickly silenced, echoed down the passage. Fallon nearly jumped at the sound's savage ferocity, its supernatural volume, and its warbling fear. Then he grinned. Fallon had caught something in his trap. He rubbed his left palm where he'd cut himself, just a little, to entice that which hunted him with a smell that he had hoped would make it less attentive to its surroundings.

The Rotting Man had told Fallon, during their unpleasant mental communication, that Damanda would meet him and Ash in Under-Tharos.

While he'd worked for Anammelech, the blightlord had related something of Damanda and her pets.

It didn't take too much of a leap to guess that Damanda, commanded to collect Fallon, would have her vampires in tow. In fact, the elf suspected that Damanda herself was a night stalker, though one of exceptional skill and mastery. Anammelech had never said.

If one her pets had fallen into the grasp of the horror the elf glimpsed back in the white room, that still left Damanda with three of her four favorites, if what he remembered of Anammelech's idle talk could be trusted—her inner cadre numbered but four. Three now, he corrected himself.

When his thoughts tried to return to the abyssal infestation occupying the white room and what his pursuer's fate might be, he shook his head. Of the abominations that lay scattered throughout these vaults, he doubted he had yet stumbled upon the worst. Thinking about any one of them for too long was unlikely to prove healthy.

He continued forward again, his gait lighter. The elf retained his grip on the child's hand. She seemed capable of keeping up with his rapid pace without tiring. As a matter of fact, she didn't even seem to be making that much of an effort.

Again, he wondered what she represented. He knew, based on his experience with her and a feeling that was transmitted merely by touch that, if nothing else, she represented something good, something uncontaminated by poor decisions and something that would not, or could not, recognize the concept of betrayal.

For Fallon, her touch hinted at restitution and perhaps redemption.

When a hint of fresher air brushed his face, he wondered for a moment if his thoughts had conjured a memory of open air. No, he really did feel a faint breeze, issuing from yet another side passage.

Fallon bent, sniffed, held a wetted finger in the air and considered.

"Well, girl," he finally said, grinning, "I may have found us an exit to the surface."

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CHAPTER 25

;schar collided with Marrec, knocking the cleric to the side. Marrec nearly lost his grip on the icy token he'd collected from the nine-fold chamber.

The demon squealed in anger. Marrec supposed he survived the contact because his sudden exit caught Eschar off guard. The time it took the cleric to wonder about his survival was too much. Already, Eschar's hellish eyes tracked him. The demon's claws moved to make an eviscerating strike. His hand cold on the token of control, Marrec felt his options were down to but one.

The cleric yelled, "Queen Abiding, I release thee! Come, and serve he who gives you freedom!"

Things happened all at once. Eschar's eyes widened as the import of Marrec's words penetrated his consciousness.

Ususi yelled "Marrec, you fool."

The crystal sphere in the cleric's grasp shattered, sending a spray of ice in all directions.

That which had been caught in the center of the crystal

remained, hovering, a blot of nothing the size of a beetle, a breath of winter cold expanded, chilling all.

Eschar mouthed a curse whose vileness surpasses mortal ability to comprehend. Despite his ferocity, he seemed frightened, then he vanished.

The hovering blot expanded, doubling, tripling, quadrupling its size in under a second. It rippled outward and upward exultantly, growing in height and width and dimension until it was at least as large as the white dome over which it hovered. The plunging temperature proclaimed winter's arrival.

The Queen Abiding was loose.

Marrec, looking into the void of evil above him, said, "Your tormentor flees. Get him."

Tendrils of darkness instantly grew downward from the hovering mass, reaching for the area where the horned demon stood a few seconds earlier. When the tendrils reached the vacated space, they continued reaching, but not in any dimension Marrec was capable of viewing.

The tendrils retracted. Eschar popped back into existence, tendrils wrapped about his straining torso. The horned demon screamed in defiance.

The pleasant female voice of the queen spoke from the darkness. It said, "I told you you'd pay for your effrontery, Eschar."

Eschar craned his head back and belched forth a thread of seeking flame, which probed like a fiery lance into the darkness' underbelly.

The bonds of darkness surrounding Eschar loosened. Taking advantage of the slackened grip, the demon struggled mightily and managed to escape the bonds completely.

Marrec, only a step away from the struggle, uttered, "No."

He stabbed Justlance into the horned demon's abdomen. Eschar flinched in pain but tried to make good his escape, ignoring the cleric's bold attack. The demon began to sprint toward the edge of the cavern.

Eschar made about ten strides before the darkness rippled then ballooned in size again. In the blink of an eye it inflated across the entire roof of the cavern, rose a storm cloud of night. Then darkness fell. Marrec couldn't see his own hand in front of his face. All was cold and utterly quiet. When the darkness lifted a heartbeat later, Eschar was gone.

Elowen watched with unbelieving eyes as Marrec called forth the sea of hovering darkness. When the void consumed Eschar, she was mollified, but then she realized that the Queen Abiding must be a far more potent force even than the horned demon to have eliminated Eschar so casually. Elowen gripped Dymondheart's hilt, determined to fight to the last, if that's what was required.

The cleric was gazing up at the roiling bottom of the darkness that shrouded the cavern's upper reaches. He was talking. What was Marrec thinking?

Marrec said, "I have set you loose from your confinement, yet I require your service. By the token which last I grasped, aid me on my quest. I must face the Rotting Man. You must help me."

Ususi yelled, "Don't bargain with her!"

The darkness roiled then stilled. Another strand reached from the lowering belly of the Queen Abiding. The black tendril probed the ground near where Victoricus had melted. Where the black wisp probed, dark liquid was drawn out of the ground, freezing as it did so. In no time, their demonic aide was reconstituted.

"Victoricus will lead you to the child you lost," spoke the Queen Abiding, as unperturbed as ever. "I sense she is moving toward the surface."

Elowen studied Victoricus, who tittered. The demon didn't seem particularly uncomfortable at its destruction and subsequent restoration.

Marrec pressed, "That is a good start, but listen ..." The cleric licked his lips. Elowen knew then that the cleric was exceedingly nervous. "I held the token. I asked for your

service. I would like your direct aid against the Talontyr himself."

The Queen Abiding responded instantly, "Don't press your hold over me, human. It is tenuous. Oh, so fragile..." A tendril of darkness dropped and caressed Marrec's face.

"I help you because I have scores to settle. The way I see it, you are my agent against those who have done me wrong. Look, I'm free, and Eschar's essence slowly digests within me. You have been useful."

The queen continued, "Yet I also have a score to settle with the Rotting Man. The pain he visited upon me when he briefly held my token, ignorant even of its power, is something that must be repaid, and here you are, all set to go against him."

Marrec nodded, said, "You'll help us?"

"One last time may you call on my aid. If you survive these mazes of ancient betrayal, you may yet come to the court of the Talontyr. That's when I will come to you, should you ask."

"After that, our arrangement is ended. If you dare to ask of me any other service, I shall enjoy supping upon your soul as, even now, I suck the verve from Eschar's fiery spirit."

Marrec nodded, somewhat shakily, Elowen thought.

The darkness faded over the space of a few seconds, replaced by the natural lightlessness of the upper reaches of the cavern.

Marrec sat down. Elowen moved toward him, but Gunggari and Ususi were before her.

"You've imperiled your soul," said Ususi, "and probably ours, too, with your foolish stunt. A creature of such evil doesn't know gratitude or the value of teamwork. It knows only its hungers and its vengeance."

"I held the token of control," Marrec defended himself.

"What exactly was the token?" demanded Ususi. "I certainly don't know what its properties were or how much protection it provides to she who would dare to use it. The Nar relied on such devices, but no knowledge of their true nature or the

manner of their construction has survived to the present day."

More weakly, "It seemed to work well enough. Eschar is defeated. We're alive."

"For the moment," huffed Ususi.

"And we have a guide," said Gunggari, defending his friend. The Oslander motioned with his head toward the reconstituted Victoricus.

Elowen wondered why Marrec didn't stand to his own defense. Perhaps he was uncertain about what he had done. Certainly she herself had her doubts. All the same, she laid a restraining hand on Ususi, who seemed about to continue her tirade. Elowen said, "That's right. Let's go find Ash and the traitor."

"Aren't you listening at all to what I'm telling you?" asked Ususi. "We can't trust the queen or any proxy in her service." She waved a dismissive hand at the ice demon.

Marrec levered himself upright with the shaft of his spear. He looked at Ususi, to Victoricus, and back. He said, "All right, I've been foolish. It was a risk to command the Queen Abiding, but risks must be taken, sometimes, if goals are to be achieved. If, as you say, the Queen Abiding cares only for her hungers, then after all the token must have had some effect over her. If not, wouldn't we all be but drained husks when she descended upon us?"

"Perhaps," acceded Ususi, "but don't call her again. Maybe that's all the additional incentive she needs to return and do exactly what you describe so mockingly."

Marrec said, "I will not call her unless we're likely to die anyway. I am acquainted with such choices when it comes to marshalling potent but dangerous forces." He rubbed his eyes as he said that last, then continued, "So what about Victoricus? Should we go on without him?"

Elowen answered. "No. I think we must put our faith in the efficacy of the token, for as Marrec says, we all yet live. It'll take too long to retrace Fallon's path back to where we lost

it. If the ice demon can get us closer, then we should follow it."

Gunggari stated, "If we get close enough, I can pick up Fallon's trail again quite easily. I'll know if the demon is leading us too far from where we want to go."

"Just how will you know that?" Ususi challenged the Oslander.

Gunggari merely smiled. Ususi threw up her hands, shook her head, and sighed in exasperation. "Fine, fine, ignore the advice of your sage. You'll be asking my forgiveness in the seconds before this deal with the queen goes sour, but I need rest. The edges of my spells are frayed and uncertain. I must straighten them in my mind if I can be of any further use. Let us take a moment before you rush us into whatever trap the queen has concocted."

Gunggari said, "All of us could use the rest, Marrec."

Elowen thought that several hours' rest sounded heavenly. Since they'd descended into the dark, they had faced a series of terrible threats. Though they'd all survived so far, their luck was bound to fail if they didn't steal a few moments of recuperation from the never-ending rush of time.

"Then let's rest," agreed Marrec, not without some relief in his voice.

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They were undisturbed for the length of their rest, measuring at least six hours. Elowen, not requiring sleep, stood watch. When all had regained some measure of their full strength, Marrec addressed the demon.

"Victoricus. Lead us to our friend Ash, also called the Child of Light, and who is also an aspect of Lurue."

With nary a titter, the ice demon swiveled and skated away across the vault field. Ash's would-be rescuers followed.

Marrec followed the smoothly moving demon most closely. At first, he walked alone, as they backtracked through the Sighing Vault, and tunnels somewhat familiar. After they

turned into a passage completely unfamiliar, Marrec asked Victoricus to slow down. Despite his words to Ususi, he of course couldn't trust the demon, or the demon's real master, the Queen Abiding.

On the other hand, Ususi hadn't held the token of control. She hadn't felt the power that had briefly coursed through his hands when he'd made his initial demand to the Queen Abiding. Marrec wasn't unfamiliar with items of potency. In the token's destruction, he'd felt a call go out, and in responding to that call, the queen had accepted a binding. She would be good to the letter of her word. She had no choice, Marrec felt certain. Pretty much certain.

He could explain his feelings about the token of control to the wizard, or at least, he could try, but Ususi was certain of her own learning, her own experience. After all, wasn't that experience valid? He'd rather not try to explain to the wizard why he was right, only to have Victoricus lead them directly into a vat of acid or some other unpleasantness. Marrec hated eating his own words, especially if fighting off a demonic double-cross at the same time.

Victoricus led them past several chambers, all open to the hallway. A faded chanting spilled from these openings. Marrec couldn't understand the words. He didn't try. By the timbre of the sound, it was obvious the voices were not made by any creature with which he was familiar.

It wasn't too far after the chanting that the ice demon stiffened, looked around, and pointed into a small alcove. The illumination burning on Justlance's tip revealed a narrow flight of stairs, fleeing upwards.

Victoricus whispered, "This way."

Gunggari walked to the alcove, bent to one knee, and examined the floor, the edges of the alcove, and the first few steps beyond. He grunted, nodding, and said, "Someone has recently ascended. More than one person."

Marrec smiled. "Good. I can't wait to see the expression on Fallon's face when we finally catch him."

Gunggari added, "Actually, more than two have gone up these stairs—at least three. One set of prints must be Ash's, they're so small. The others are adults."

"How many?" queried Marrec, worried.

"It's hard to say. Could be as many as four more people, though some of the prints fade in and out. It is strange."

"Let's hurry, then," Marrec decided.

They filed into the alcove; it was too narrow to go except one at a time, then on up the stairs, moving with alacrity. Victoricus, not so proficient on the stairs, fell behind.

5>he caught them just as they left the grasp of Under-Tharos. Some stars were visible through the overhanging branches of the Rawlinswood, but their light was not sufficient to illuminate Damanda and her cohorts as they fell upon Fallon and the child.

The elf hunter struggled in Bonehammer's grip, before subsiding when Damanda caught his eye. "Easy, Fallon. You're among friends, now." She couldn't help but smile when she spoke. Friendship was something Damanda knew of only as an intellectual concept.

Slender Absalme caught the child by the hair and made to lift her free of the earth. The girl called Ash reached up and touched Absalme's wrist. A burst of sun-bright light exploded from where finger touched arm.

Damanda screamed, throwing a hand over her face. The light burned her, drove like hammered nails into her eyes, but an instant later, the terrible radiance winked out.

When she could see again, blinking away the great purple blotch, she saw that both Bonehammer and Lex lay moaning and steaming, just as her own exposed flesh still smoked.

There was no sign at all of Absalme.

It was clearer to Damanda, then, why the girl was also called the Child of Light. Damn the Rotting Man for failing to mention that particular detail. She snarled to her two remaining lieutenants "Get up, you sluggards."

Luckily, Ash didn't press her advantage. She had merely reacted to a touch she didn't like and now stood quietly.

Meanwhile, Fallon also still stood, blinking, though of course his flesh hadn't reacted quite so explosively to the light thrown off by the child. Damanda sighed. Fallon would retain his use, after all, she realized. She glided up to the elf, her eyes and skin already healing over.

"What were you trying to accomplish, ascending to the surface, elf?"

Fallon took a breath, then said, "I thought I could get to the center of Dun Tharos quicker, here on the surface, where my wood lore would be useful."

Damanda shook her head and said, "You were instructed by the Talontyr to lure your pursuers through the dangers of Under-Tharos."

"I was also entrusted to bring the Child of Light to him at the center. If I had fallen prey to some wandering demon below, I couldn't very well do that, could I?"

Damanda's eyes narrowed. Fallon was too impertinent for an underling. Time to end his independence here and now. She caught his eye, trying to snare him with her will. She was shocked when something, some obstruction in the elf's mind, prevented her. Some influence of the Child of Light, she knew instinctively.

She settled for cuffing the elf. Such was her strength that Fallon cried out, nearly felled.

Damanda lied, saying, "Listen, Fallon. You're alive right now because you've proved yourself to our cause. Don't jeopardize your position with foolish impudence."

Rubbing his jaw, Fallon nodded, though Damanda thought she could detect a hint of defiance in the set of the elf's shoulders. She promised herself Fallon's blood, once he had served his last purpose.

Damanda continued, "We've got to get moving, before dawn slips over the horizon. Fallon, continue to shepherd the girl, so that she accompanies us without qualm. She seems to

have taken a liking to you."

The elf hunter took one of Ash's almost limp hands and did not trigger a burst of destroying light. That settled it; she'd have to let Fallon live until they got Ash into the presence of the Rotting Man.

"We'll continue on the surface for a bit, since we're here; it will be quicker. We'll go to ground in a little place I know ahead, before the sun rises."

Fallon glanced from her, to Bonehammer, to Lex, and finally to where Absalme had been destroyed by direct contact with Ash's light. Damanda didn't doubt the elf had recognized their nature. Good. In her long experience, such recognition inspired fear and obedience.

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Fallon followed behind the slender woman with purple hair that Damanda had called Lex, pulling Ash gently with one hand. Damanda broke the trail ahead of Lex, using techniques that the elf hunter recognized in his own woodcraft. The hulking Bonehammer walked behind, ensuring that Fallon didn't try to run off into the woods, though he hoped that he had convinced the vampires that his loyalties lay with them.

Dawn threatened to break within the hour. As each increment of time passed, he could sense the tension of the three rising. Of course, he'd known immediately what they were long before they'd caught him. Unfortunately, he hadn't been in a position to lay a trap like he was able to do against the first lone vampiric seeker. He'd decided that his best chance for survival lay in pretending that his loyalty to the Rotting Man had never wavered.

Fallon believed he'd pulled off his ruse, though the blightlord had tried to dominate his will anyway. He had Ash's earlier expulsion of the Rotting Man's control to thank for his continued resistance. He squeezed her hand in thanks, though of course Ash didn't respond.

As he walked along, he began to wonder what he had gained

really. If he truly wished to protect Ash, he would have to make some sort of break for it and fight these creatures. The more they drew him into their power and the closer they ventured into the Rotting Man's territory, the less likely he could fight his way free with his and Ash's life intact. Perhaps he should just attack Damanda right then?

He continued to debate with himself as they walked.

They had already traveled for a few hours through the forest. He thought it interesting that Damanda made no effort to hide their passage. It either meant that she no longer feared being followed by Marrec's group, or that she actively wished the trail be found, like a lure.

Fallon ventured, "What of the cleric and his friends, then? Did demons get them after all?"

Starlight revealed a slight shrug from Damanda ahead. She said, "Perhaps, but when we find the sanctuary I know of, we'll make preparations, just in case."

Fallon knew that the blightlord wouldn't waste energy on such 'preparations' unless she knew there was a good chance that such an energy expenditure during daylight would have a payoff. That meant that Marrec, Elowen, and the others—he couldn't recall their names—might very well be on their trail.

This meant that he might have allies at his back, allies who hated him and probably wanted to kill him, to be sure, but allies all the same. He wondered what he might do to slow the vampires' progress to give those he hoped were behind a chance to catch up.

They broke out into a large clearing. The orange light of advancing dawn revealed a large, mausoleum-like stone building in the clearing's center. Thick undergrowth partially hid the entrance.

"What is it?" wondered Lex, speaking for the first time. Her voice sounded like a squealing hinge, irritating and penetrating.

"It is an old Nar hermitage," said Damanda, sounding

pleased. "I found it on a map the Talontyr keeps in his library. When we followed our missing morsel... er, friend, up to the surface, I decided we'd get back to the Close quicker if we took an overland route. I knew this structure would be around here."

Lex grunted acknowledgement, looking at the lightening sky.

They entered the dark building.

None of the vampires commented when Fallon picked up a length of dead branch before pulling Ash after him through the entrance.

CHAPTER 27

^arrec smiled when they reached the surface. They had lost track of time during their sojourn in Under-Tharos. When the light of day caressed his face, his spirits lifted a bit. His friends were likewise affected, all except for Ususi. The wizard seemed impassive in the sudden daylight and squinted as if in irritation. Strange woman, thought Marrec.

Gunggari brought his dizheri to his lips and played a quick, celebratory tune, which was difficult with the low, thundering notes the instrument was mostly able to produce, but the Oslander managed to sound a cheery refrain.

Elowen clapped the man on the shoulder when he finished. "What was that tune called?" she asked.

"'Welcome to the Morning.' It seemed appropriate."

Marrec said, "Not morning too far along, by the light." Elowen nodded.

"Gunggari, do you still have the trail?" inquired Marrec. With the sun above, even through the filtering branches of the Rawlinswood, they might be able to close some ground with their quarry.

The tattooed soldier stowed his instrument, crouched. After a moment, he looked up, said, "It is clearer than ever. This way."

They traveled then for a time under the boughs of the forest.

Where they had ascended to the surface, the forest didn't seem especially corrupt, for all that it overlay Under-Tharos and was nominally in the control of the Rotting Man. They had found a portion of the forest that had escaped direct contamination with evil or rot. Though the sunlight seemed different there than to the west or south, harsher, it was sunlight all the same. The scents of pine and fir were a welcome break from damp stone. Above, clouds piled high along the skyline as they rushed toward the dryer east.

It eased Marrec's soul.

Gunggari stopped again. He looked around at an area of forest that didn't seem too much different than any of the areas they had just passed, at least to Marrec.

Gunggari said, "There was some sort of meeting here. I think I understand now. Two were far in the lead, but four caught up with them, right at this point."

The Oslander searched the ground and nearby trees more closely. He shook his head, saying, "Something strange happened. One of the pursuers left quickly. There is no further sign of that one. The others were involved in some sort of minor altercation, perhaps just a scuffle. Afterwards, all continued, but in this direction, toward the center of the forest again."

Marrec had earlier noted that they had been moving away from the center. Strange. He asked, "And Ash?"

Gunggari nodded, "Yes, her prints remain clear, clearer than all the rest, nearly. She was led this way." He continued to point toward the center of the forest.

"How long, Gunggari?" asked Elowen.

"Sometime before dawn."

"Then we are a few hours behind, at the very most. Let us make haste."

As they made to move on, Victoricus tittered. The demon said, "I've brought you as far as the Queen Abiding intended. From here, you go alone."

With its last word uttered, the ice demon cracked, and

shattered into small chunks. The pieces began to melt in the sunlight.

Marrec said. "It's up to us."

"The demon was useful," noted Gunggari.

Ususi sniffed. Marrec knew the wizard felt otherwise. He hoped she wasn't later proven right.

They redoubled their pace through the forest, though Ususi was unable to maintain a speed quicker than a fast walk for too long, but they made good time. Even Ususi finally seemed to lose something of the dolor that had fallen upon the party after their deal with the Queen Abiding.

Around noon, Marrec judged, Gunggari led them to the edge of a clearing. The Oslander held up his hand signaling everyone to stop.

All saw the lone structure. It had an unsavory quality to it, like something one might find in a cemetery.

"Is it the Talontyr's Close?" whispered Marrec. "I thought it would be larger."

"No, you'll know the Close when you see it, if the Rotting Man has truly taken up his seat where the Nentyarch once ruled," said Elowen. "A great ring of mighty trees surrounds the Close, if the Rotting Man didn't fell them."

Gunggari signaled again, with some annoyance. He wanted quiet. Marrec nodded to his friend. Gunggari must have noticed something. The cleric sidled up and raised an eyebrow in question.

The Oslander moved his head close to Marrec's ear and explained, "The trail goes into that structure. Wait here; I'll check the borders. If I am unable find an exit track, we may have caught our quarry."

Marrec nodded. Gunggari went.

The cleric kept his eyes riveted to the structure, waiting. He told Elowen and Ususi about Gunggari's postulate when they sidled up with questions.

Finally, the tattooed soldier returned from the opposite side of the clearing. He said, "We have them."

"Lurue is kind," muttered Marrec. Then, "Gunny, why don't you slip up to the entrance first; you're the quietest. Elowen and I will follow once you're in place. Ususi, stay back here and provide spell support."

"As if I'd do something different," sniffed Ususi. She was still mad. That woman could hold a grudge with the best of them, Marrec mused.

Gunggari flitted forward, running low but quietly, his dizheri grasped in one hand, his other out for balance. Marrec stood ready to cast Justlance, but his friend made it to the wall next to the darkened entrance without stirring notice.

Next he and Elowen moved forward. He couldn't help it; his chain mail clinked a little as he moved, but he hoped that the sound wasn't loud enough to penetrate the building. Elowen was quieter. Both reached the entrance, spread out on the side wall opposite Gunggari, without anyone inside reacting to their approach.

All seemed quiet within, save for the subtle hum of what Marrec supposed to be forest insects.

Marrec turned his head and saw Ususi's silhouette still back at the edge of the clearing. He saw the wizard's head nod. He asked, "Everyone ready?"

Elowen drew her blade. Something unexpected happened then.

When the light of the sun above hit the dulled blade, the wood began to thrum, producing an earthy tone that Marrec somehow equated to the sound of growing things. The veins on the blade, which had shrunk to near invisibility, began to pulse and swell, as if sucking the light in directly. Tiny flickers of emerald light played up and down the blade, and the intensity of the sunlight seemed stronger, more lush, around both elf and blade. The elf's eyes were wide with astonishment.

Elowen blurted out, "Oh. The Nentyarch's blade... it wanted the sun. Look, the xylem and phloem..." The elf ceased to speak as she gazed at her scintillating blade.

Marrec tried to shush the elf, but Elowen realized her own lapse, clapping one hand over her mouth. She looked at Marrec, an apology in her eyes, but not without a matching gladness that had been absent earlier. Marrec wasn't familiar with the strange druidic terms Elowen used, but he hoped that their quarry within hadn't heard her wax so eloquent.

Marrec communicated his hope to Gunggari across the span of the open entrance with two raised eyebrows. The Oslander knew what the cleric's questioning stance meant, so he cupped an ear against the building and listened.

A few moments later he disengaged, his face diffident. He pointed into the entrance and silently mouthed, "They know."

Blast. There went the element of surprise. Instead of a raid, they'd be rushing into an ambush. Better to rethink the plan. Why not ambush them instead?

Marrec called loudly, "Hello in there. Why don't you come out? Fallon, we know you're here. Come out, Ash unharmed, and we may not extract the full measure of vengeance that you deserve."

He heard a voice speaking, inside, very quietly. It sounded like a woman's voice, but he couldn't make out her individual words.

Then Fallon's unmistakable baritone responded, "I don't think so. We, uhm, I prefer it in here where it's cooler."

Marrec responded, "Who is this 'we' you speak of? Don't try to hide it; we tracked more than just you and Ash into this ruin."

"No one you want to meet. Leave here. We're not coming out."

Marrec paused, then looked back toward Ususi, who still remained at the edge of the clearing. He yelled to her, "Wizard—why don't you see about flushing our friends out where we can see them? Be careful, though; we don't want to hurt Ash."

He saw Ususi rise and step forward. She looked at him,

shrugged, and shook her head no. Marrec wondered if, based on the kind of magic he'd seen her throw around in the past, she was unable to whip up a spell quite so discerning. Then the wizard raised one finger, cocking her head. Marrec read that gesture as 'But...'

Next, she brought two fingers to her face, one to each eye, then extended her hand to point to the side of the structure where Marrec and Elowen crouched. Marrec looked to where she pointed. Solid wall.

Finally, Ususi incanted a spell. When she finished, she pointed to the wall again, a section of which ghosted into empty space. Marrec realized she had created a second entrance. Their element of surprise was back.

"Go," he hissed to Elowen.

He and the elf rushed into the new opening. Gunggari, ever the bravest of them, dashed in through the main entrance.

It was utterly dark, except for the flickering magical light still clinging to Justlance's tip; the glow around Dymondheart was too dim to provide light.

Two figures crouched on either side of the main entrance. One was nearly a giant, corpse-white, save for obscene tattoos crawling across his body. He was poised and ready with a great hammer. The other was a thin woman in form-fitting black armor, so tight and articulated that it looked as if it could be a second skin. An

aura of tiny, biting insects surrounded her. Mosquitoes? Though not as tall as the man, Marrec somehow knew she was the more potent of the two.

Further back in the shadows stood three more figures. Ash. And that bastard traitor Fallon, holding Ash's hand in a death grip. Near him stood a bone-slender woman in an obsidian cape. Tomes, scrolls, and wands spilled from her belt. Close cropped hair the color of dying flowers grew on her head.

Everyone in the chamber turned to look at him, caught by surprise by his and Elowen's self-made access.

Then Gunggari charged in through the main entrance, his dizheri spinning in his hand like a mill wheel. One edge caught the big man, who hissed, falling back a pace. Marrec's eyes caught the glint of two overly developed canines. The big man was a vampire. He prayed Gunggari could handle one vampire, while he confronted the woman in articulated armor.

Elowen raced across the intervening ground toward the purple-haired caster. Good, keep that one occupied, he silently encouraged the hunter. He and Gunggari had enough on their plates without having to worry about spells from the periphery.

The woman's armor caught Justlance's first thrust. She grinned.

Oh, oh, Marrec thought. Two more canines.

"They're all vampires!" yelled Marrec.

"Great Ones preserve me," murmured Gunggari. Marrec knew his friend hated night walkers more than anything else, a hate that bordered on fear.

The woman, still chuckling, said, "That's the least of your worries. I am Damanda—the right hand of the Rotting Man." Marrec knew what that meant—in addition to being vampiric, she was also a blightlord. This fight was going to be a lot tougher than he'd anticipated.

If he could overcome his reluctance, Marrec wondered if his ability to turn flesh to stone would have any effect on the unliving tissue of night walkers. Maybe a true gift of Lurue, one he had not depleted in the long decline of his connection with his goddess, might be called.

Bringing his spear up in a guarding position, Marrec bellowed, "Lurue commands that you give way, unholy creatures. Turn your faces and be destroyed!" His spear head, its shape that of a stylized unicorn horn, blazed with golden light for a moment, briefly shining brighter than the magical light that Ususi had cast upon it.

Damanda merely narrowed her eyes and hissed. The large

one faltered, vibrating with its desire to resist. Marrec didn't turn his head to see how the one facing Elowen was responding, but he could feel its resistance, too.

Something wasn't right. The power of the ritual, which he always imagined as gentle hands on his shoulders, was anemic. If, in truth, Lurue stood behind him bolstering him with her strength, then it was as if she only lightly touched him. Worse, she was backing away, her touch growing ever lighter, until he couldn't feel it at all.

The resistance peaked; his power broke. None of the vampires turned away. All smiled the wider. The large, hammer-wielding nightwalker croaked, "Your god is weak." Marrec groaned, giving ground. The vampire was right.

Damanda commanded, "Lex, spell them, will you?"

The purple-haired woman standing near Fallon began to incant. Elowen closed with the incanter, bringing her blade around in an arc sure to separate head from body, but a thaumaturgic field shimmered into visibility, deflecting the blade. Lex finished her spell, and a wave of violet light expanded from her, washing over everyone in the room.

Marrec felt his joints begin to lock up but shook off the effect. He saw that Gunggari also resisted the magical hold. Not so Elowen—the elf hunter stood rooted in place, struggling, but unable to command her body into motion.

Gunggari made to dash to Elowen's side, but his corpse-white opponent was too near, swinging his great hammer in deadly parabolas, promising death to Gunggari if the Oslander's attention wavered.

Marrec was pressed by the blightlord Damanda. She moved in, the noise of her insect aura growing maddeningly loud. Recovering more quickly from his failed attempt to turn back the vampires than Damanda expected, he thrust forward with Justlance.

The tip bit deep, momentarily dimming the light in the room, then it was nearly torn from Marrec's hand as Damanda twisted back. She swiped at him with one hand—no, it was

some sort of clawed or bladed gauntlet composed of darkness itself. The blade caught him along the side, scoring his flesh, but not mortally. Both combatants staggered back a pace. Marrec observed Damanda's wound begin to knit in a way that his own did not.

The blightlord grinned, her teeth again prominent. She pointed at him. The insect mass swarming around her bulged, sending a filament of biting mosquitoes his way. Marrec expected that the insects, like their master, were vampiric.

The mosquitoes would suck him dry in seconds if he didn't do something...

He called upon his secret heritage. He found it lurking just behind his eyes like a hound eager to be let out. Marrec complied, focusing his attention on the swarm as if a single entity. For a moment, he felt a connection between himself and the tiny points of hunger, but in the very instant the connection was made, it was transformed and snuffed out. A hail of tiny stones fell as one from the air, shattering into so much dust. Damanda's insect aura was stripped from her with Marrec's glance. A pain lanced Marrec's eyes like before. A weakness suffused him; he knew that his ability to call on his deplorable heritage was depleted for now.

Despite the pain and the blood trickling from the corners of his eyes, Marrec smiled at Damanda.

Not so the blightlord. She yelled, "What's this? A medusa posing as a human?"

A shadow occluded the doorway—Ususi. She appeared mid-spell and with a flourish, released a cascade of brilliant electrical arcs, stabbing full into Damanda and Gunggari's foe. Both staggered and flailed, as the flesh smoked and boiled under the intense magical assault.

Damanda spoke, tiny sparks flashing across the gap of her opened mouth, "Lex! Stop gawking; kill the one you've immobilized."

Marrec tried to get to Lex, the vampire mage standing next

to Elowen, but Damanda, still smoking, was on him again. Gunggari grunted with a similar exertion, beating back his foe. They were both pinned.

In a fluid single motion, Lex extruded spindly white hands, claw tipped, from the folds of her black cloak, and grabbed Elowen as if to embrace her. Lex opened her mouth wide, creating a gap larger than any mere human could accomplish, and brought her head toward Elowen's unprotected neck.

The vampire shuddered, pausing. "Huh," grunted Lex, releasing her hold on Elowen. She bent her head to look down at her chest. From it protruded the broken end of a wooden branch, darkly slick with pooling blood.

Fallon stood behind Lex. It was he who had thrust the branch through the vampire's chest.

Marrec blinked—Fallon saved Elowen's life.

Already shriveling and smoking, Lex turned and slashed Fallon with her razor sharp claws. In a spray of blood, both went down, Lex crumbling and Fallon grasping at his neck.

Marrec's gaze, Ususi's unexpected assault, Fallon's betrayal, and Lex's destruction was enough for the blightlord. She pulled a rolled parchment from her belt with one hand while reaching out to tap her last remaining follower with the other. She began uttering the arcane words inscribed upon the parchment in short, clipped breaths.

Marrec threw Justlance. The spear screamed through the empty air that a moment earlier contained its intended target. Damanda was gone, likely back to the court of the Rotting Man.

On the ground where he'd fallen, Fallon struggled, gasping. Marrec and Gunggari rushed across the chamber, Marrec to Ash's side, Gunggari to kneel next to Fallon. Ususi stepped tentatively into the chamber, looking around suspiciously. Elowen, still standing stiffly, groaned and tried to move her arms. She managed to do so, if somewhat clumsily. The compulsion was apparently lifting.

"Are you ok, girl?" Marrec asked Ash, inspecting her for bruise, blemish, or other sign of poor treatment. Ash was unmarked. He hugged her close.

Gunggari inspected Fallon's bleeding neck wound. He said, "Marrec, his wounds are beyond simple tending, and the Nentyarch's satchel is empty of healing balms."

Marrec knew that Gunggari, in speaking of his satchel, was actually asking if Marrec retained any healing grace. Marrec met his friend's eyes, shaking his head. The cleric remembered seeing named vials in the satchel, one of which contained his own name, but none had contained Fallon's name. Disengaging from Ash, he bent, too, at Fallon's side.

Fallon looked up at Marrec, whispered, "I should never have taken the girl. I am sorry..." He stopped, coughing blood.

The unicorn warrior said, "It was a brave thing you did, just now. In the end, you chose right."

Fallon, breathing shallowly, smiled then said, "I know."

He breathed his last, a smile frozen on his unmoving lips.

Marrec gently closed the elf's staring eyes. "May Lurue grant you redemption."

Damanda and Bonehammer fell from a height of over ten feet. Damanda corrected, landing on her feet with perfect grace, though Bonehammer stumbled and fell heavily onto a pile of crumbled brick.

She had panicked. She had used her emergency escape scroll, as unreliable as it was, when things turned sour. Luck was with them. Despite the scroll having been scribed by Lex years earlier, and Damanda's only passing facility with the arts of wizardry, both she and Bonehammer made the uncertain transit and in' full possession of their limbs.

Shafts of afternoon light bored into the chamber from two high punctures in the ceiling. Luckily, neither of them had appeared beneath those rough apertures. Damanda had picked the bastion of retreat the very moment Lex had penned the scroll, of course. A fortified but empty building in the middle of the Dun Tharos ruins still above ground, it

had seemed unlikely to fall into disrepair after having stood for so many centuries. It was near the Close but not in it, in case it was from the Rotting Man she had to use her escape. Despite the odds, in the intervening time the structure had moldered and fallen into further disrepair. That would teach her for choosing an above-ground retreat. Of course, she couldn't repeat her mistake even if she wished. Lex had been destroyed by that prince of betrayal, Fallon.

Damanda roundly cursed the elf, envying the Rotting Man his way with words and ancient languages but making do with her own obscene vernacular. At least Lex had slashed the little bastard as she fell. Damanda knew lethal blows. She doubted she'd see Fallon again.

"What now, Damanda?" inquired Bonehammer, already back on his feet. With the light of day so close, the wounds given by that odd dark man with the strange war club were not mending as quickly as they should.

Damanda considered her minion's question. She said, "The Talontyr once told me that the cleric and his band would bring the Child to him of their own accord. If that is true, we merely need to arrange an ambush of such magnitude that nothing can survive it; well, we want the girl to survive, of course."

"Perhaps we should refrain from setting an ambush, if they're going to come to the Rotting Man anyway."

"I'd rather the Talontyr receive the girl from the hands of his trusted lieutenant."

Bonehammer nodded; he was nothing if not a yes man to Damanda's will.

While the sun remained above, they were trapped there in her emergency redoubt. On the one hand the building stood within sight of the Close itself. Once darkness fell, she'd raise an army. In a few hours, she'd gather hundreds of blighted volodnis, twig-blights, and other rot spawned creatures. She knew all the passages, all the ways that the Close could be accessed, both above and

below ground. If the cleric pressed ahead with his fool's errand, they'd be caught and flayed, there was no doubt in her mind.

First, a bit of rest. Activity during the day, even spared direct light, was taxing. Yes, a bit of a lie-down was called for, she decided. Soon, in just a few hours, the sun would dip below the horizon. Then her full powers would return. Her quarry was as good as in her grasp.

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Ash bent, touching the limp form of Fallon on the forehead. Where she touched, a glow lingered before suffusing the body. It seemed then to Marrec that Fallon's motionless form sighed.

Ash said, "Redemption he has."

Marrec turned quickly to the crouching girl. "Ash. Can you hear me?"

The girl rose, the look of compassion fading from her face, animation fleeing her body. In a moment, she looked as she always did—unresponsive and uncaring.

Marrec was grateful for the small miracle that moved Fallon to save Elowen from the vampire's bite. He murmured thanks to Lurue. He just wished the betraying hunter had decided to return to the light before he'd kidnapped the girl. Had it been so, perhaps all might now be different.

"Now what?" wondered Elowen.

"We continue to head toward the center of Dun Tharos and confront the Rotting Man. With Ash in our keeping, we may have some protection," replied Marrec.

"Going overland will take days—yet I do not wish to return to Under-Tharos."

"True," said Marrec. He turned to the Oslander, "What do you think, Gunny?"

"Either route has its difficulties. Above ground we'll likely run afoul of the Rotting Man's forces—such was the original reason we decided to approach from below—but the subsurface route seems far more indirect and dangerous

than we hoped. The path is not clear."

"It is not," agreed Marrec, sighing.

Gunggari continued, "If the blightlord had retreated physically rather than magically, I might have tracked her back to the center." The Oslander shrugged.

Ususi held up one hand. "Hold on... that gives me an idea."

The imaskari grasped the Keystone that she still wore around her neck. She brought it to her eye, then began scanning the chamber as if gazing through a looking glass.

Marrec furrowed his brows. "Surely the Mucklestones do not reach so far?"

Ususi said, "They do not, but listen. The Keystone is a tool designed for use with the Mucklestones, true, yet it is also sensitive to all magic associated with portals and transport. Perhaps the magic used by Damanda to escape left a seam in space, as such spells often do, though they always fade quickly. I might be able to locate the seam using the Keystone... and there it is!" the wizard crowed.

"What good is that to us?" wondered Marrec.

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When they appeared, Marrec and the others did not fall ten feet like Damanda and Bonehammer. Despite utilizing a raw, poorly executed, and fading seam in reality, Ususi had the Keystone. With its power, she grasped the unraveling threads of Damanda's escape, wove a new portal, and transported the group into an echoing warehouse with nary a bump.

Marrec blinked—slanting shafts of daylight betokened approaching twilight, but it was still brighter than where they had just stood. The cleric slowly turned, scanning the area for Damanda and her hulking henchman. As he looked, he kept one of Ash's hands firmly in his left hand. In his right hand was Justlance.

Loose brick rubble covered the floor, piled in untidy heaps in some places. Dust covered all. Gaps in one wall revealed a ruined cityscape, tumble-down and covered in forest growth.

Ususi had thought that the endpoint of Damanda's escape lay near the center of Rawlinswood. The mage was correct. They must be somewhere within Dun Tharos, in one of thousands individual ruins that made up what remained of the ancient Nar city.

Where was Damanda?

If she was in truth cursed with vampirism, she wouldn't enjoy standing there, indirectly illuminated by fading daylight. Perhaps farther back, where the ceiling allowed through less light?

Marrec pointed to the rear of the building, lost in shadow, where a slender stone door stood closed. Gunggari caught his gesture and nodded. Marrec released Ash's hand. He looked down at the girl and said, "Stay here." Ash studied the middle distance. With his free hand he unstrapped his shield from his back.

The cleric and the Oslander approached the door. Elowen was not far behind, her blade still shimmering with its exposure to the sun it loved. Ususi hung back.

Without losing time to doubt, Marrec heaved open the stone door. It fell backward, unsecured to the lintel, generating a terrific rolling boom as it struck the ground. Beyond was a tiny chamber without exits, no more than fifteen feet on a side. The light from Justlance's tip revealed two forms lying upon the ground, side by side, arms crossed across chests, eyes closed.

One reclining figure was Damanda, the other Bonehammer. Before he could get his sinews to respond or cough out a warning, the eyes of both the sleepers shuttered open.

Damanda jerked upright like the arm of a catapult, without the intervening need to lever herself up as a living creature might. Her arms shot forward as her form moved to vertical, catching Marrec in the chest. That supernatural shove bowled him back through the narrow entry and out into the brick-strewn warehouse. A brick cut him above the eye and another across his forearm.

Marrec gained his feet, cursing his slowness. He heard Gunggari yell, then a clash of arms. Elowen called out the Nentyarch's name, as she so often did when fighting. Ususi stood to the side of the doorway, not committing to entering, but chanting and waving in the midst of casting a spell.

The cleric charged back into the room. Bonehammer, lurking by the door, caught him on the side with his great weapon—Marrec barely caught the blow on his shield, though his arm nearly went numb with the effort. He was forced to step back a pace. Had the vampires fought that hard a few hours ago, Marrec doubted he and his friends would have survived. Something was different. As his shield glinted in a stray beam of sunlight, Marrec realized what it could be—the vampires were trapped—the only place to run was either outside the building into direct sunlight or there into the main warehouse where a stray beam like the one that'd just fallen across his shield would have more serious consequences on vampiric flesh.

He yelled, "Gunny, herd them out this way—into the sunlight."

Ususi unleashed a spray of magical bolts that traced wildly arcing trajectories through the air. Many of the bolts found their mark in Damanda's flesh. The vampire was undeterred in her fight with Gunggari and Elowen, but she spared a smoldering glance for the wizard in the doorway. Ususi screamed, threw her hands before her eyes, and fell back.

Marrec hoped that glance wouldn't prove to be trouble later. He knew about the domineering gaze of vampires.

Elowen growled, "I'll keep this one pinned—help Marrec with that other, one." Gunggari danced back, his warclub landing a parting shot to Damanda's head, which was absorbed with a grunt of pain.

Dymondheart seemed to grab Damanda's attention more than the dizheri. She didn't merely absorb Elowen's swift swings—she deflected, ducked, and spun to avoid taking a

cut.

Gunggari was upon Bonehammer, smashing with an unrestrained fury that momentarily startled the vampire. Marrec saw his chance, ducked under his foe's guard, and came up on the other side.

"Now!" yelled Marrec, hoping to coordinate his activity with Gunggari's.

He and the Oslander dashed themselves directly into Bonehammer. Marrec threw his arms about his foe, who promptly turned his head and sank his fangs directly into Marrec's neck.

A fire blossomed there, and a weakness. The weakness felt something like his loss of contact with Lurue, but more immediate and far, far more lethal.

Though his strength seemed to be flowing from him, with Gunggari's help he forced the vampire back, step by step, into the larger, ruined chamber.

The angle of the sunlight was becoming extreme. A few minutes more, maybe less, and the sun would be down, but such questions no longer mattered for Bonehammer.

Marrec and Gunggari forced the struggling, biting vampire directly into a reddening shaft of pure sunlight.

"Damanda!" screamed Bonehammer, as he released his bite on Marrec's neck. -

He began to thrash, so violently and fast that neither man could maintain his hold, but it was no longer necessary to hold him. Bonehammer was speared in place by the shaft of sunlight.

Their foe's whipping limbs moved so quickly that Marrec could barely discern them. Smoke coiled off the vampire's skin, and a reddish radiance peeked from Bonehammer's open mouth, his nostrils, from behind his eyes, and even from his fingernails. The next instant all burned through. The fire that had been ignited inside reached the surface. A flash of all-consuming heat and red light left nothing behind but ash and disintegrating fragments of skull and spine. Even

that smoked away a second later.

Marrec sagged. He worried that the vampire's bite would reveal itself as a debilitating, life-draining wound, but he didn't fall. There was still Damanda.

"Let's bring the other one out," he whispered to Gunggari, though the Oslander was already half way back to the fight where Elowen kept the blightlord at bay.

Marrec spared a glance for Ash. The girl remained standing where they had appeared, looking completely out of place in the darkening ruin. The last shafts of light penetrating the building dimmed still further and were finally extinguished. The sun had set.

Marrec stumbled back to the door, bypassing Ususi along the way. She stood shaking her head back and forth, as if trying to throw off a hallucination. Trouble. He could tell. Damanda...

Back in the sealed antechamber, Elowen had the blightlord backed into a corner. The vampire feared that blade; its sap was suffused with pure sunlight, and Marrec perceived it was also made of wood. He couldn't imagine a better weapon to use against a vampire.

"Cleave her, Elowen—she can't heal Dymondheart's blows. You can slay her outright."

Between gritted teeth, parrying Damanda's blows, Elowen said, "What do you think I'm trying to do?"

Gunggari was already in the mix, applying his dizheri with abandon. Marrec heaved himself forward, still feeling weakness flooding every limb. He brought up

Justlance. Perhaps he could pin the elusive blightlord in place...

Damanda screamed as she received a cut from Dymondheart across the stomach. The flesh crackled and smoked as if the light of the sun itself had touched her.

"We've got her," said Gunggari.

Damanda shrieked and spun, put her head down, and ran directly into the wall behind her. The ancient masonry,

already unstable, gave way before the vampire's supernatural strength. Hardly checking her speed, Damanda burst through a hole of her own making, bricks, mortar, and larger stone blocks falling around her. Damanda had made her own exit.

Through the breach in the wall, all could see the ruined street of Dun Tharos. Elowen and Gunggari raced each other to see who would be first after the vampire; Elowen won. Marrec brought up the rear, noticeably slower than his two friends.

The forest-infested ruin of Dun Tharos was silent in the gathering night. There was no sign of the blightlord.

Marrec screamed in frustration. Then, thinking Damanda might be playing them for idiots, he rushed back into the smaller antechamber, then on into the warehouse. Ash remained, as did Ususi, who had apparently recovered from her shock.

She asked Marrec, "What happened?"

The cleric continued forward until he stood again at Ash's side. Then he said, "The blightlord escaped, again, but we destroyed her last servant." He pointed with his spear where the final fragments of Bonehammer lay.

"Are you ok? I saw her try to lock gazes with you."

"I'm fine," answered the wizard. "Just took me a few moments to clear my head."

Elowen and Gunggari returned.

Elowen said, "We are near to the center of Dun Tharos. I can nearly see the great trees that surround the Nentyarch's old seat. Great trees, filled with life and en-

ergy, each one so tall and grand that you wondered how such a thing could exist..." The elf seemed overcome for a moment with memory.

Gunggari said, "If we are so hear, we should press forward, before the escaping blightlord can warn her master, and he can mount an answering defense."

"The time has come, eh?" Marrec questioned his friend,

strangely reluctant now that it had come to it.

His weakness persisted. His thoughts were muddled, and even Justlance seemed heavy in his hand. He didn't want to come up against what would likely be his greatest test in such a condition, but there was no choice. He would endeavor to ignore his state. It was the final push.

The cleric took Ash's hand again, intending to ask her if she was ready, though he knew she wouldn't respond.

Ash surprised him by squeezing back, as if truly feeling the pressure of his grip. She looked at him, truly met his eye for just one amazing moment. In those eyes, Marrec found rest and the promise of renewed strength. He gasped, but already Ash's grip had slackened to its usual flaccid strength.

Once more, Ash had shown forth her secret, inner power. The strength promised in her eyes grew and blossomed in the cleric's flesh. Marrec felt hale and whole of body and mind. Moreover, for a fleeting moment, it felt as if his nascent connection with Lurue herself might return. The momentary bonding weakened immediately then winked out, but it left a lingering feeling of hope, and his renewed vigor didn't hurt.

"Yes, the time has come to face the Rotting Man, even here in his place of power," Marrec told Gunggari, but loudly enough to address everyone. "With Ash at our side, I believe we have a chance."

"One moment, though," cautioned Gunggari. He looked over to Ususi. "What of her? She met the vampire's gaze. She could be under the blightlord's influence."

"Don't be an idiot," barked Ususi.

"It's not idiotic to enumerate our weaknesses prior to battle." Ususi responded, "No simple glance by a blightlord can suborn my mind; I am stronger willed than that. She merely caught me off guard—had I been any less strong, yes, she might have had me. What you perceived as weakness was in fact my fighting off her insidious instructions. I'm happy to

note that I was successful."

Gunggari studied the mage, no expression crossing his face. Marrec knew the Oslander well enough to interpret the look. Gunggari didn't trust Ususi's words.

Marrec shrugged. Before Lurue's absence, he had access to spells that might have cleansed any taint potentially remaining from the vampire's gaze. He said aloud, "She seems fine."

That earned him a quick smile from Ususi. Of course, he mentally vowed to keep an eye on the mage, too.

"It is time to beard th'e Rotting Man in his lair," said Marrec. "Everyone ready?"

CHAPTER 29

(jreat plazas and wrecked temples devoted to demonic powers lay half-buried in the boggy forest that covered all. Stone, cracked and broken into numberless pebbles, littered the expanse, hinting at tumbled statuary, building facades, and other structures. Only ruinous heaps remained of what was once a grand avenue, overgrown with forest plants. There was an arch that still stood, but it looked upon an empty cinder, flooded with foul water. Stagnant pools floated a detritus of wreckage and age-old destruction, but despite the growth, the crumbled grandeur, and encroaching marsh, the outlines of a once-great city were clear, visible despite the lowering twilight.

Elowen took the lead, but Marrec paced at her side. She had once walked these very streets, before the Rotting Man took possession

of the Nentyarch's guardian fortress at the center of Dun-Tharos. Her knowledge allowed them to find a dry path over the half-drowned streets.

As they trudged along, alert to every shadow, Elowen volunteered, "The Nentyarchs ruled from the forest castle at the center for nearly six hundred years, preserving the Rawlinswood from the encroachment of human kingdoms that sometimes sought to loot the Nar conjuries."

Marrec commented, his voice quiet, "A strange place to choose as a druid capitol."

"Perhaps, but the Nentyarchs believed that the ruins of the old Nar capital remind us of humanity's ability to wreak harm on nature. On the other hand, the forest that encompasses the city offers an example of what might be accomplished with patience, strength, and belief in the sanctity of nature."

"Hmm." Marrec didn't know if the elf hunter offered wisdom or an excuse. Before he could formulate his thoughts into something more politic, his eye caught movement high above the trees.

"Say, what's that?" Marrec pointed to a darkness growing in the sky. Light was fading too quickly to be the natural fall of night. It almost looked like...

"A thunderhead," said Elowen. "The cloud is forming unnaturally quickly, and unless I'm turned around, it is above the Close."

Lightning flashed within the boiling thunderhead, as it continued to grow and expand outward in all directions. The smell of rain, mixed with something foul, gusted across them.

Gunggari said, "The Rotting Man knows we are coming."

Marrec couldn't gainsay his friend's conclusion.

They passed down a ruined street, dotted with pines and potholes, between gaping buildings missing doors, windows, and in many cases ceilings and even walls. Then they turned down a wide lane. Before them, not more than five hundred yards by Marrec's estimate, was the Close.

It was as if the largest trees ever to grow naturally in the world were all gathered together in one place, trunk to trunk, in a great ring. From their perspective, and with the failing light, Marrec couldn't know the diameter of that ring, but he guessed that the great trees encompassed a circle at least half a mile in diameter.

The great trees were bare of green leaves or needles, seemingly dead. Worse than dead, they were gray and stony, petrified. But they swayed in the rising wind as the thunderhead above began to make its presence known. Or was their movement controlled by some deeper malevolence?

"That bastard," said Elowen, looking upon the petrified trees, a tear on her cheek.

With a flash of lightning and a crashing clap of thunder, a driving rain emerged from the belly of the black cloud. Marrec and his friends were instantly drenched in the water, which smelled stagnant.

The weakening light revealed that the great fortress of dead trees had a glow all its own—a faint greenish phosphorescence—not the green of living things, no, but instead the essence of gangrene itself—greenish black, pustulant, and pulsing. Thus, even with the arrival of night and through the mist produced by the driving rain, Marrec was able to see the forces that began to stream from the Close.

He had thought the great petrified trees were fused together, but there must have been enough space to navigate between them. Like cheese squeezed from a colander, lines of figures squirmed from between the trunks. The figures, once free of the Close, massed and moved down the lane toward Marrec and the others.

The cleric noticed that the ruined buildings on either side, too, were disgorging ungainly figures. There were hundreds of figures closing upon them at a dead run, with dozens more appearing each second.

Marrec took a pace forward. Gunggari stepped up to Marrec's left, but a pace behind. Elowen remained to his right, also back a pace. Ususi remained directly behind Marrec, but with space enough between to shelter Ash. In that way, they encircled the girl.

As they rushing forms grew closer, Elowen said, "Volodnis.

They're all rot-touched, like those we fought in Lethyr."

It was as Elowen said. A tide of blighted volodnis threatened to flow over them, and the rain continued to fall, cold and uncaring.

The blighted volodnis were worked up. They hissed, shouted, and stamped their feet. They broke upon the defenders like a tide, but Marrec held steady. Justlance's tip became a silver flame in his hand like a thunderbolt, a veritable rod of death to every volodni who opposed him. Marrec slew them as fast as they approached. To his right, he saw Elowen make a similar impact with Dymondheart, save when she slew, the volodnis' rotting bodies took flame with purifying fire. To his left, Gunggari laid about him, dispatching foes with his sap-spattered dizheri. Behind him, he could hear the continual chant of Ususi, bolts of magical fire laying volodnis low—sometimes one, sometimes several at once.

They advanced. Through the flashing lightning and implacable rain, the silhouette of the Close loomed larger.

They fought, they cursed, and they slew, and the tide continued to part, and a trail of the dead grew behind. Larger shadows begin to stir on the outskirts of the fight, which in a flashing dazzle of lightning were revealed as reinforcements for the enemy—twigblights. Marrec realized that the Rotting Man must know the secret of their animation even without the aid of Anammelech.

The cleric shouted above the thunder, "We can't fight both volodnis and twigblights and hope to win."

Ever economical in wielding his dizheri, the Oslander took a moment to shrug, which became the initial move of a dramatic swing that laid two volodnis low.

Each volodni they slew allowed the menacing twigblights to move closer through the crush. They didn't have to get too close, though—the ones Marrec could make out were fifteen, maybe twenty feet high. Already some were leaning out over the volodnis, seeking to lash Marrec with claws of splintered

wood.

Time for the bargainer to make good, Marrec decided. He screamed out, "Queen Abiding, answer to your final agreement. Aid me."

The sky changed instantly, as if she had been waiting for the call, just out of sight. Where before was driving rain, lightning from the thundercloud, and the sick glow of the petrified forest, there was nothing but black. Tendrils of darkness reached down from that immensity, stabbing into the boggy ground like twisting roots, but more often spearing a blighted volodni or screeching twigblight. Darkness was upon them.

The queen had come.

The void continued to descend. The Rotting Man's blighted forces cowered and screamed. They sought to escape, but the periphery was already void, so they ran back and forth. Vainly they crawled and clambered, packed into the narrowing space like swarming flies, wailing, calling upon the Talontyr for aid. Their cries were for naught. Some attempted to flee directly into one of the walls of advancing nothingness. In that shadow they found their end.

The lowering void contracted. Sight was taken from Marrec. All sound ceased. Even the sound of the cleric's own heartbeat was denied him. Marrec wondered if perhaps he should have heeded Ususi's warning about dealing with demons.

Hearing returned and sight, too. The wide lane was entirely clear of blighted volodnis and twigblights. Neither the blood, the sap, nor the bodies of those already slain, nor the surging mass who a minute earlier had been intent of overwhelming Marrec and his friends remained.

Of the void, only a blot of darkness persisted, almost lost in the rain-streaked night sky, visible only as an absence when lightning streaked.

The queen spoke. "It is finished. If we meet ever again, you shall discover the fate that has befallen your foes." Then the

void, too, was gone.

The crashing thunder echoed hollowly down the lane.

"Forward, then," urged Marrec. His voice was hoarse, rough from the fear that had sleeted through him before the darkness lifted.

No one replied. Perhaps all were feeling an emotion similar to Marrec's. The cleric's relief was tempered with the knowledge that they had yet even to break the perimeter of the Close, and already he had used up the one resource he had thought to unleash on the Rotting Man himself.

It would have to be his petrifying gaze, then, should he get so far, he decided. What an awful surprise it was to him that he would at last come to rely on the evil aspect of himself that he had so long sought to forget and suppress.

Their footsteps clattered on the wet stone of the lane. The tops of the petrified trees towered over their heads as they approached, the branch tips lost in the lightning-rent clouds. Marrec sighted a space between two of the great trunks wide enough to pass two abreast and moved toward the cavity.

They were in. They walked a narrowing path of mud, mold, and mulch of long-dead leaves between two great boles, each as wide and tall as a cliff face. The rain couldn't reach into the tight space, and the sound of the thunder above was muffled. The light on Marrec's spear tip proved the only illumination.

"This is the perfect place for an ambush," noted Gunggari.

Marrec had entertained the same thought, yet they continued ahead unmolested. After about twenty paces, the aperture between the trees reached its narrowest, forcing Marrec to walk sideways. He shuffled forward quickly, certain that an attack was imminent, but no. The passage between the trees began to widen again.

They were through. They stepped into the Court of the Rotting Man.

The Court of the Rotting Man was a great plain encircled by petrified cliffs that towered into the sky. In truth, from within,

the ring of colossal petrified trees resembled a steep caldera or crater heralding some ancient catastrophe.

When the court was the Nentyarch's Seat, the space within the ring of then-living trees had been green and filled with garden paths that wound through groves of flowers and fields of fruit trees, watered by carefully maintained brooks that passed around daisy fields and under quaint stone bridges.

With the coming of the Rotting Man, life had moldered and gone to rot. The paths were washed-out mud tracks, smelly and home to worms and stinging flies, the fruit trees bore only blots of poisonous putrescence, the brooks were dry, and the flowers long since dead. Great

holes pockmarked the Court, throwing up great mounds of fresh, muddy earth in places, lending a cemetery feel to the entire space.

Carved back into the inner surfaces of the petrified trees were scores of doors, openings, and dark windows that hinted at chambers, halls, rooms, passages, and alcoves that could lie behind them. Catwalks connected passages from tree to tree. A veritable army could dwell therein: blighted volodnis, twigblights, blightlords, prisoners, slaves, and whatever other dreadful creatures the Rotting Man kept under his sway.

The center of the Court was where all eyes were drawn. In the Nentyarch's day there had been a simple wooden structure built from specially grown and reverently harvested hardwoods. What had changed since the coming of the Talontyr? A great mist, seeping up from the rot and mound mud hills, obscured the center of the plain.

At least the overhanging and interwoven branches of the ring of petrified trees high above sheltered most of the court from the rain, though flashes of light, rolling booms, and the occasional fall of water continued to gain entry.

Elowen pointed the tip of Dymondheart at the central mass of fog. Only by moving forward, into the mist itself, could the

cloaking fog be pierced and the center be revealed. They approached it, careful to keep away from mud that seemed too deep, or cavities in the ground from which the smell of rot issued too strongly. Unfortunately, they could not entirely avoid the stench of decay, but by luck, skill, or some other agency, nothing challenged them as they approached to the very edge of the mist.

Marrec plunged into the clammy whiteness, his companions arrayed about him, and Ash tucked safely among them. The stench of rot grew more intense within the mist, though perhaps the loss of sight merely intensified the other senses. They trudged forward, Marrec hoping that he was ready for anything. Again, nothing challenged their approach through the fog.

As they walked, Gunggari opened the satchel given him by the Nentyarch. He pulled forth four vials and distributed three of them to his friends, one apiece. .

Marrec looked at his, "What's this?" though he guessed what it might be.

"The last four vials within the Nentyarch's satchel. I perceive that we are about to come face to face with our nemesis."

"What do these do?" wondered Ususi.

Gunggari shrugged, said, "I do not know—these last four were written with a label containing each of our names only. I inquired of the Nentyarch what these vials represented before our abrupt departure from Yeshelmaar. He indicated that each elixir was different, but each would provide a strength best suited to the needs of its named imbiber. I presume this vial, for instance," Gunggari indicated the one he had retained for himself, "will grant me strength of arm." He shrugged again, "But I do not know."

Marrec palmed the vial in his left hand, retaining his grip upon Justlance in his right. His comrades made similar arrangements.

When at last the fog began to thin, the center was finally revealed.

The Nentyarch's home, as described to Marrec by Elowen, was gone, with no evidence of it having ever been there. In its place was a lone ash tree—an ash tree of towering size, a hundred or more feet high, though still below the height of the overhanging petrified branches, crowned with an oval mass of sickly green leaves. The leaves hinted that the tree lived, but even so, it was afflicted. The bole was twisted, blackened, and terrible. The tree's leaves seeped a sick fluid, and at its base was a massive swollen cyst, partially burst, though the poor illumination failed to reveal what lay within the cavity.

Immediately before the cyst was a throne of hardened but putrid mud. A figure sat the throne. The Rotting Man.

From where Marrec and the others exited the mist, they stood not more than forty or fifty feet from the throne and that which sat upon it, but Marrec couldn't help but shudder when he saw the Rotting Man. To his right he heard Elowen cry out, Ususi curse, and even Gunggari take a deep breath. Ash apparently had no reaction, though Marrec didn't take his eyes from the putrid seat.

The Talontyr was the size of a man, but a man wasted with rot, disease, and madness, from whose pores constantly seeped droplets of blood. The Rotting Man's body was a battleground for hundreds, maybe thousands, of virulent diseases, all of which strove against each other and the flesh which hosted them.

The Rotting Man could not perish from such ravages. Such was the gift of Talona, the Lady of Poison, the Mother of All Plagues, and other names more gruesome. Rot was the Talontyr's strength.

Before the Rotting Man's throne was an altar of rough-cut stone upon which sat a crystal vase. The vase held a slender stem to which a single bone-white petal clung.

To the Talontyr's right stood Damanda, glowering. She had reacquired her swarm aura.

Surrounding the Talontyr and Damanda were various

creatures, all disfigured with lesions, pustules, and other outward signs of sickness, though of course in the Court of the Rotting Man, these creatures obviously drew strength from their condition. Unfortunately, the Rotting Man's forces created a buffer too wide for Marrec's special gaze to touch directly upon the author of all their misfortune. Among the creatures arrayed around the throne, Marrec recognized a green-tinged unicorn, a satyr whose eyes were gone but for oozing sores, a score of nixies—or perhaps pixies—each the color of night, a dryad whose ongoing wide-mouthed scream of pain was too raw to be heard any longer, some diseased wolves and bears, plus a few monstrous insects the size of men...

"Ash!"

Marrec glanced back. The child he had so long shepherded was gazing with apparent interest at the large ash tree. Recognizing it. Naming it. Ash and ash...

Before Marrec could comment or question the potential enormity of Ash's pronouncement, movement drew his eye back to the front.

A bone-slender hand slothfully extended from the rotting garments that clung to the Talontyr. The pointing finger selected Marrec as its target.

A voice, hoarse and phlegmy yet resonant, issued forth. The Rotting Man said, "The game has been amusing, but it is over. I will take the child. Now."

A beam of virulent power pulsed forth from the Rotting Man's entire body, washing over Marrec and his friends before any could do much more than blink and draw a breath in surprise.

Marrec fumbled with his spear as his vision cleared, expecting pain, wounds, or worse, but he was fine. Looking around, he saw that his friends were unharmed, too. Of them all, only Ash seemed unsurprised. In fact, she had somewhere acquired a golden glow, a glow of health, vitality, and promise.

"So," said the Rotting Man, executing a look so sour that Marrec's stomach threatened to turn.

Struggling for breath, the cleric finally managed to find his voice. He said, "We've come too far to fail now."

The unicorn warrior didn't know exactly why the Rotting Man's assault had drained away so ineffectually, though he guessed that already Ash's nature was beginning to assert itself. He needed to seize the moment, salvage some time for Ash to discover the missing portion of herself. That, after all, was the reason they had come so far.

Marrec continued, his voice gaining in strength and authority, "We've brought Ash, the Child of Light here, against all the obstacles you've set. We know the girl is but part of the Aspect promised by the Green Powers, among which my goddess Lurue numbers, the Aspect that was sent to end your reign here in Dun-Tharos."

The cleric knew his speech was too short, but he didn't quite know where to go from there. Ash was not taking any special action or initiative, unlike what he had imagined, except, of course, her mere presence may have been the only reason he and her other companions yet drew breath following the Rotting Man's initial assault.

The Rotting Man hacked out laughter. Chuckling wet gasps of amusement, he finally said, "You have brought her to me, haven't you? All my effort to bring her here, yet where all my servants have failed, you succeed. Marvelous!"

"Not true ... you were trying to kill Ash. Kill her so the Aspect could never take full shape."

"No, I'm afraid not, young simpleton."

"You fought us hard enough just outside the ring of your fortress," replied Marrec, confused.

"It is true I expended many of my servitors, many more than I thought I would, truth be told. I did not foresee that you would make common cause with a demon. If I had not thrown my forces against you, you would have begun to wonder why I offered no resistance here at the heart of my

strength. You would have wondered if you were walking into a trap, which indeed you were."

The Rotting Man went on, "You have something that I require. It may be that it retains sentience enough to protect itself and you against my direct touch. However, experience reveals that my servitors are under no such restriction."

The figure on the throne roared something to Damanda. In turn, Damanda screamed, "Bring the child to the Talontyr; kill her guardians."

Marrec brought up his left hand, his thumb already flipping the cork from the vial he held. As the creatures surrounding the Nentyarch surged forward, Marrec

gulped down the contents of his vial. Of his friends, only Gunggari did the same; Elowen raised her living blade and gave voice to a cry of challenge; Ususi began to incant a spell. Ash did nothing.

The rot-eyed satyr charged Marrec, its head down and the ram-like horns positioned to smash him. The elixir Marrec had just drunk, fruity and pleasant, seemed to open his sinuses and expand his lungs. The potion was nothing less than liquid revelation, laying bare all that was shrouded, even Marrec's own clogged conscious. Facts about himself broke free from his subconscious and began to bob toward his surface awareness—but he didn't have time to take note. More than anything else, the elixir opened a door, however briefly, that had been shut in Marrec's mind—it made a connection where association had fallen away over the last few years—it granted him a channel to Lurue's grace.

The blighted satyr collided with Marrec, sending Justlance clattering from his hand, yet the cleric smiled. Not because he retained his feet despite the charge, not because his spear returned to his grip almost instantly— Marrec smiled because unfeigned hope woke within him as he contemplated the array of abilities returned him.

Gunggari smashed the carapace of a five-foot-high beetle, then engaged the green-hued unicorn in a desperate battle

—the Oslander attempted to beat the unicorn senseless before the blighted creature succeeded in eviscerating Gunggari with its blackened horn.

The pack of blighted nixies swarmed Elowen. The elf wove a defense by slashing Dymondheart too quickly for even a nixie to penetrate. She cursed when one still managed that feat and promptly bit Elowen with too-large teeth stained midnight black.

Ususi's chant grew louder; in Marrec's experience, that indicated that a spell of power would soon be unleashed. Damanda then said, "Ususi—I command you to slay these who you call your friends."

Ususi choked, ceased incanting, and instead began to slowly reach for the yellow wand at her belt. Her arm shook, and her hand moved only slowly, as if she fought her own hand's movement every inch of the way, yet progress was made.

The cleric began a chant of his own—with his new connection to Lurue, he felt he could dispel the evil influence that allowed Damanda to instruct Ususi. The damned satyr charged him yet again, spoiling what would have been his first god-given spell in days.

Marrec screamed in a fury quite unlike his normal manner, then was forced to defend himself physically with Justlance. Instead of incanting a spell, he yelled between spear thrusts, "Gunny, stop Ususi!"

The Oslander was pressed just then by a growling wolf that'd lost most of its skin to a cancerous scab that made its flesh particularly resistant to Gunggari's warclub.

Damanda laughed as Ususi's hand closed about the Wand of Citrine Power. The wizard drew the wand from its slender sheath, her face contorted as she fought the compulsion.

A shaft of brilliance like the sun's, full and true, touched down then, piercing the mist, the overhanging petrified branches, the storm, and even the night. It fell around Elowen, who was holding her blade above her head, its shining surface reflecting and sustaining the sunlight.

Elowen brought the blade quickly down from its position above her head, pointing it directly at Damanda, who still stood beside the Talontyr on his earthen throne.

A ray of citrine probed at Elowen from Ususi's shaking wand. The wavering ray failed to find its target, but Ususi took aim anew, shaking her head as if denying her actions.

The greater shaft of sunlight surrounding Elowen changed its focus, sliding smoothly away from the elf and toward the target identified by her pointing blade. Elowen yelled, triumphant "Meet the day unbound!"

Damanda screeched, backpedaling. The Rotting Man raised an eyebrow in apparent interest, nothing more. The shaft of light slid across the intervening blighted creatures without harm, moving more swiftly as it approached Damanda.

The vampire began to run, but the shaft of light caught her, just as Ususi's second wand-aimed ray struck the elf hunter in the back. In a moment, Elowen was encased in a slab of amber-like crystal, unmoving.

The following beam of sunlight was undimmed and flashed full upon the fleeing blightlord. Damanda's scream was so horrible that even the Rotting Man's forces paused a moment to determine the vampire's fate.

When the shaft winked out a moment later it was established once again what happens when a vampire is subject to sunlight.

It dies.

Marrec, having recently witnessed another vampire's fiery death in similar fashion, recovered a moment quicker than the hollow-socketed satyr. His erstwhile foe sank to the earth, stupidly clutching a newly created third cavity in its skull, courtesy of the cleric's spear.

The blighted unicorn turned away from the crystal-encased Elowen and charged Gunggari from the side. The Oslander avoided being disemboweled by the horn but received a nasty wound across his side.

Marrec saw that Ususi was back in control of her faculties.

He'd have to trust her to release Elowen from the confinement she'd created. He lunged sideways, catching the blighted unicorn with the untainted unicorn tip of Justlance. The contact instigated an instant and dramatic response from the blighted creature—its eyes rolled wildly; it reared, neighing, then it collapsed.

The scabrous wolf leaped again at Gunggari, growling and slaving. Again the Oslander beat back the wolf.

Marrec didn't want to shift too far over to help the Oslander—he needed to plug up the middle, between the Oslander and the slab of crystal holding Elowen—otherwise nothing would protect little Ash who still sheltered at his back.

Ususi finally found her voice, cried out, "I can release the elf," then began casting anew.

Gunggari's dizheri finally found purchase—the wolf yelped, rolled, then ran off into the mist. Another creature immediately moved to take its place—a twigblight.

Worse, additional blighted creatures threatened to break around the other side of Gunggari, Marrec, and Elowen's line that protected Ash. Ususi remained in the midst of a spell. Marrec quickly counted all that still stood between himself and the Rotting Man. He estimated only about ten or so enemies. With his connection to Lurue back, he wondered if he couldn't catch them all—or at least most—in a burst of holy power tuned to banish evil.

Ususi finished her last spell. With a tinkling of shattering glass, Elowen shed her crystal containment. The elf shook her head, looking around to see what she had missed.

"Hold, my creatures," spoke the Rotting Man.

The blighted creatures paused in their onslaught, uncertain of their master's command. Marrec and Gunggari paused, too, wondering what deal the Talontyr might be willing to offer. The Talontyr was getting nervous, guessed Marrec

"I tire of this game. I begin to think you'll pierce my defenses, and what? You'll attack me directly, Talona's

Chosen?" The Rotting Man laughed.

Marrec considered throwing Justlance right then, or perhaps moving just a bit closer in order to bring his gaze to bear, but the Rotting Man continued speaking. "While it might be edifying for you to begin such a contest, it is beneath me. It's more fitting, really, that you meet your end at the hands of that which you've come so far to meet."

The Rotting Man half turned on his seat, still choosing to sit even in the presence of his enemies. He waved his hand toward the great cyst bulging from the base of the tree behind his throne. He said, "Yes, Talona informed me far ahead of time of the Green Powers' gift to the world I moved to intercept it. I grew the Thieving Ash to snare the divine energies of the gift as it was born into the world Those energies are contained therein, infused with my own special touch, Talona's blessing, and the goad of continual pain."

Marrec whispered, "Thieving Ash?" He looked around at the girl behind him. The child's eyes focused then on the cyst, as if she expected something wonderful to emerge—or something terrible.

The Talontyr, nearly giggling in sudden glee, continued, "Yes, the child there with you is the portion of the Green Powers' gift that slipped through my fingers. Thank you for delivering it to me. Finally! The entire gift is now mine."

"Behold, then," continued the Talontyr, "what has become of the Aspect of Light. Behold Talona's Step-Daughter!"

The fleshy flaps obscuring the partially burst cavity heaved and ripped. A fantastically large bubble of blood swelled darkly from the fissure, and immediately burst, releasing a wave of liquid in every direction. Shrieking, the blighted creatures surrounding the throne scattered before the scarlet flood, though the Rotting Man laughed as the stinking bile poured over him.

Something still fought to free itself from the cyst—something too large for Marrec to immediately comprehend. It heaved itself free of the cavity, showing first a vast

expanse of festering flesh twenty or thirty feet on a side, like the side of a hill come to life. The heaving, pulsing body was supported by four wide legs, elephantine in their simplicity and shape but larger, yet the struggling monstrosity, when it finally extricated itself from its woody chrysalis, was headless. It was a vast

mass of gross flesh supported by four massive legs with no front or rear, only body. Except... something protruded from the creature.

A slender horn, convoluted and fluted, but straight and spear-sharp at the end, jutted from the infested flesh. The horn was over fifteen feet in length if it was an inch, yet Marrec recognized its likeness from the first. The horn was like a unicorn's.

"Abomination!" The words tore themselves from Marrec's throat. The wrongness of the creature, the warped nature of its existence, the plight of the Gift—it was all too much for the cleric to bear. He ran forward, past the throne on which the Rotting Man sat. A look of intense concentration suffused the Talontyr's face, but Marrec barely noted it as he moved closer to the vast bulk.

Gunggari ran forward with Marrec. The Oslander was more nimble than Marrec remembered, jumping and leaping ahead with new-found vigor. Perhaps it was the influence of the Nentyarch's final vial? Gunggari moved so quickly that he passed the cleric, running up so he was nearly beneath the Daughter. Utilizing his forward charge, Gunggari swung his dizheri around, two-handed, delivering a mighty blow upon the creature's lower flank. The Daughter's flesh rippled, and from somewhere, though no orifice was visible, a basso scream erupted.

The Daughter's single horn slashed through the air with uncanny speed, nearly decapitating Gunggari—it would have, were it not for the Oslander's newfound quickness.

Marrec began incanting a spell, a spell he'd been unable to cast for months, a defensive spell. As soon as he felt its

protective embrace enfold him like an old friend long missed, Marrec continued forward. He would try first his newfound connection with Lurue—he would try to turn the creature from its present course, perhaps break it from the control of the Rotting Man.

Bringing his spear up, Marrec bellowed, "Lurue commands that you give way, abomination. Turn your face and be destroyed."

His spear head, its shape that of a stylized unicorn horn, blazed with golden light. Unlike when he had tried this same ability against the vampires, his power did not break. He radiated a surge of holy power, which washed upon and over the Daughter.

The creature's entire bulk shook, and a deep cry issued again from some unseen maw, but the creature would not be turned from its directive. The horn slashed forward, elongating as it moved, spearing at Marrec with a life-ending thrust. If not for the cleric's just-cast defensive spell, he'd have been skewered. Still, the shock of the thrust sent him stumbling back.

By that time Elowen charged the Daughter, too. She came up to the creature several feet from where Gunggari danced, trying to keep from being trampled beneath the creature's stamping feet. Fancy sword-work was impossible—she faced a creature too large for such niceties—it was too mindless to be distracted by feints and too massive for a blade to deflect a horn-thrust or a trampling foot.

Elowen ran up and shoved Dymondheart directly into the side of the creature, all the way to the hilt. Then she began to saw the blade back and forth, trying to lever the wound into something much larger. A spray of vile matter, fecal by its stench, began to spray from the widening wound, but the elf hunter had no time to finish her task. The massive horn, supernatural in its ability to elongate and shorten at need, found a new mark. The Daughter's horn swiveled and struck, slamming lengthwise into Elowen's body. The elf was sent

bodily flying through the air, Dymondheart spiraling away the opposite direction. When Elowen rolled to a stop, she failed to rise.

Ususi finally entered the fight, this time on the side of her friends. A ray of yellow stabbed forth from her wand, but she targeted not the monster but its progenitor. The ray fell full upon the Talontyr as he sat his throne. A flash of amber and a crack that competed with the thunder still rumbling above followed. The Rotting Man was unfazed. The power washed away from him with no effect, other than to catch his attention.

As Marrec cast Justlance deep into the side of the Daughter—causing the creature to buck and squirm, but only in apparent annoyance—the Rotting Man spared a splinter of his attention for Ususi.

He said, "You sought my attention—see what you make of it."

He gestured, and a wave of muck and rot gathered and flowed from around his throne, building, cresting and falling upon the wavering Ususi.

Where the wave passed, the imaskari stood unharmed, surprised to still retain her life. Ash's influence still protected them from the Rotting Man's direct power. Indeed, Ususi had moved to stand ahead of the child, even in her fear thinking to protect Ash. It was the child who offered their only protection there in the Court of the Rotting Man.

Marrec glanced back at Elowen. The elf had not stirred from where the Daughter's horn had thrown her. Marrec realized she was out of the fight. He didn't dwell on how hurt she might be. If they were unable to stop the Daughter, they would all find themselves in a similar or worse state soon enough.

Time again to bring his gaze to bear. The Daughter had no eyes. Could he even affect that corruption of divine energy given life? He opened wide his eyes and reached again for the feeling in the back of his mind, the core of ferocity, the ember of his heritage. He called upon the gaze of the

medusa.

Invisible lines of influence plunged from Marrec's eyes, instantly wracking his head with pain. Where his gaze touched upon the Daughter's side, flesh bubbled—bubbled, then ceased all motion, as flesh became stone. He couldn't encompass the creature in a single look—he had to paint the Daughter with his gaze, moving left to right, right to left, and in the wake of his passing glance, flesh gave over to stone.

The Daughter reared up. A massive slab of hardened stone sloughed away to reveal terrible pink flesh within. The slab of stone, once part of the Daughter's side, smashed into rubble, forcing Gunggari to skip away, though a few chunks caught the Oslander on the side, drawing blood. Marrec didn't care. His power was overcoming that of the Daughter. His vision began to fill with red, blood pooling in his sockets from the strain, but still he pumped his force of will through the connection he'd made with the Daughter, through the thrumming invisible line of his sight.

Gunggari's wail of agony was as water on the fire of his effort. The force of his gaze winked out immediately. The Daughter, rearing, had caught Gunggari. The Oslander was down. Down, too, came those hideously heavy feet, stamping. Gunggari rolled, but his pain hindered him, and he couldn't roll far enough. The Daughter's foot smashed down upon the tattooed soldier, breaking bones and bursting flesh. The tattooed soldier joined the elf hunter in stillness.

If Gunggari by some miracle retained grasp on life, his bleeding body would soon betray that effort without immediate tending. Marrec didn't waste time thinking about it—he simply ran full out for his friend's side. Where he presumed that Elowen yet survived her contact with the Daughter, he knew his friend would not. He might already be dead.

A geyser of fiery energy poured down upon the flank of the

Daughter, distracting it long enough for Marrec to reach Gunggari's side. Ususi was still in the fight and unleashing her most potent spells against the rampaging horror.

The cleric felt for the tattooed warrior's pulse—faint, growing fainter, but still beating. Marrec called joyfully on his renewed link to Lurie and poured healing into his friend, but Gunggari's flesh was grievously wounded. The Oslander opened his eyes but remained prone. He had managed to stabilize Gunggari, stop the bleeding. That would have to be enough.

The Daughter completely ignored Marrec, even though the cleric fairly kneeled at the creature's feet. Furious at the fusillade of spells with which Ususi continued to burn it, the corrupted aspect charged the mage. Ususi cried out, seeing her death approach. She shot a look of apology Marrec's way, touched the Keystone hanging at her breast, and was pulled backward, out of the Rotting Man's court by the power of the amulet. She was gone.

The Daughter, deprived of its intended target, stumbled to a stop, its immense but dreadfully quick legs causing the ground to quake with each and every footfall. Its bulk hid from view both the Rotting Man and... Ash.

Marrec stood and began running in a single action. The creature was between him and his charge. If it killed her, then all their effort was for nothing.

Justlance was in his hand with merely a thought, but what hope did he really believe he had? The creature had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was nigh on unstoppable. What force could hope to breach its bulk and reach its heart?

What physical force... but wait—the beast was born of a gift of the Green Powers. It was a corrupted aspect, but an aspect all the same, and somehow, Lurie was tied up in all of it. Was slaying the creature the answer? Though foul, at heart it must be good. Something that seeks to do good, though it commits evil, can be redeemed, or so Marrec

hoped.

The knowledge that was flushed from hiding by the Nentyarch's elixir finally completed its work. Revelation illuminated Marrec, then, like the sun that lifts up from behind a mountain, revealing the plain that was previously dark. Marrec saw a parallel between Ash and himself, and the Daughter and his monstrous gaze. Moreover, he saw an equivalence between any creature that hopes to do good, but through inaction, inattention, poor judgment, or even self-interest, does evil. Does that action, then, condemn such a one to a life of evil thereafter? Does it mean that that one does not deserve a second chance?

Well, no, of course not.

Life is but a brief flicker, and as the saying goes, "What will it matter in one hundred years?" is all too true for most creatures. Life is a short-lived gift. If that gift is not explored in all its dimensions, it is like spurning the gift, setting it aside on a knickknack shelf where other things of little interest accumulate. How else can life be experienced but through decisions? How else can good be judged from evil, if mistakes are not made? That was the secret that revealed itself to Marrec: To err is to live, and to live is to err, but one can only pick oneself up after each mistake, wiser for the experience, and go on. What else is there?

One had to forgive oneself.

The Daughter's horn nearly removed his head from his torso as he skirted its bulk, bringing him more fully to the present. Taking the knife-sharp blow along the haft of his spear, Marrec ran on, rounding the flank of the Daughter. There was the Rotting Man, still sitting upon his throne, concentrating upon the corrupted aspect, possibly controlling its actions, or at least preventing it from lapsing into unrestrained destruction.

There was Ash, defenseless and alone in the Court, looking up into the blank expanse of the Daughter's flesh, as if searching for something. Despite having no eyes or any

other organs for sensing its environment, the corrupted aspect paused, seeming to study the slip of a girl on the ground before it.

The Rotting Man commanded, "Take what is yours, Cystborn. Take the capstone of your power and your sentience. Become what you should have been these last six years. My scourge, Talona's Step-Daughter."

The Daughter moved forward, as if to engulf the defenseless child, but slowly, tentatively, as if the Rotting Man wished to relish his final victory.

Marrec, his head still spinning with his own personal revelation, knew that his own revelation applied, too, to Ash. "I forgive you, Ash," yelled Marrec. "That's right. We all forgive you for allowing the Rotting Man to steal away your purpose, your form, and your power, but you have to forgive yourself."

Ash's gaze slowly swiveled upon Marrec and focused. She was listening.

"Let yourself off the hook—put your mistake behind you and learn from it. Take back what is yours. You didn't mean for things to come to this."

Ash's eyes narrowed, and her tiny head began a slow nod, as if in grudging understanding.

"Enough of this. Consume her!" thundered the Rotting Man.

The Daughter fell upon Ash, absorbing her entirely into its shambling husk.

The Rotting Man laughed. The cleric despaired, crying out his frustration.

The Daughter lay splayed across the ground where it had leaped upon the child.

Then a change came over it. The Daughter's body began to throw off mass in great rotting layers, one after another, like an onion. Every layer broadcast images into all the living minds nearby—the layers were like records of the sordid malice the Talontyr had committed against the world. The first few were only insults and aggravations. Then came

violence and death, and rot followed after. It was Talona's influence, psychically manifest as each section of the Daughter fell away. The next layers revealed the Rotting Man gathering to his side minions versed in spells and foul sorceries. Marrec saw piles of skulls left behind where the Talontyr's forces triumphed; he saw living trees burned with torches, the tree-dryads locked within, screaming; he saw crimes without number, and creatures rotting from the inside; he saw sacrifices made to Talona in all their gruesome detail. Marrec saw the war of the Green Powers against Talona, and the secret plan the Rotting Man and his goddess drew up to subvert those plans and redirect those efforts to decay. Every layer that fell away from the Daughter revealed fragments of the past to Marrec, as if he were remembering something he'd always known.

Then the molting layers revealed more recent occurrences. Marrec saw blightlords releasing poisonous spells, rots of terrible efficacy, and magical diseases spreading across the Rawlinswood and across the forest of Lethyr. He saw the cruel new sorceries devised by the Rotting Man. Seeing, the cleric understood what the Rotting Man intended should the Daughter ever achieve complete integration; he saw the massacres, the deaths, the plains strewn with slain armies left to decay and disintegrate in the noon-day sun. He saw the Rotting Man's hope for final triumph.

Little of the Daughter was left now. The core of rot remaining scrambled like a live thing, trying to escape. Marrec stabbed it with Justlance. Screaming, the blot skittered away but Marrec stabbed it again. It lay quivering, and Ususi, stepping out of the surrounding mist where she had hidden, burned the place where it lay with magical flame.

The layers were shed and the core was gone, but something remained behind, hiding behind the core. It was washed clean. It was whole, complete, and shining. It was a great unicorn, white and gold, with eyes too bright to look into, or maybe it was a woman, whose features reminded Marrec

instantly of little Ash. It was the woman Ash would have grown up to be. Rather, it was the Aspect the Green Powers had intended to send all along. Araluen.

Araluen fixed Marrec with a look from her blazing eyes. She said, "I forgive myself for succumbing to the Rotting Man's trap, as you have forgiven yourself for your accident of birth. Redeemed in our own eyes, we are both of us fit to serve Lurue." The unicorn touched Marrec lightly on the forehead with its crystal horn. Knowledge was imparted to the cleric, and he smiled.

With curses so potent that minor creatures of decay were produced from each utterance, the Rotting Man stood up from his throne.

The battle between growth and decay, years delayed, was joined.

V

CHAPTER 31

The form of the Talontyr shuddered. His skin rippled, split, and something far larger emerged from the husk—a nightmare of slime and liquefying limbs, melting and reforming. At the same time, the Aspect incanted a series of divine syllables. Her body grew in stature equal to that of the Talontyr rebirthed, and a sword of celestial fire ignited in her hand. Then she was upon the Rotting Man in a fury of righteous might.

Groaning, the rotting husk gave ground, but not quickly enough. The celestial blade cleaved the slime-ridden form, splitting it into two heaving masses. The section farther from Araluen continued to retreat, its gesticulating arms spraying gore as they jerked through an intricate series of spell-casting motions. Meanwhile, the split-off portion of the Rotting Man heaved and pulsed—each section retained a life all its own. It threw itself at the Aspect, its side splitting to reveal a great toothed maw.

Araluen cried out as the attacking portion of the Rotting Man bit at her sword arm, its mouth crunching and slobbering.

Light, not blood, spilled from the Aspect's flesh, and it burned the beast, forcing the creature to relinquish its hold, but the monstrosity's incanting twin finished its spell.

A ghastly greenish-black cloud blossomed above, but beneath the overhanging branches of the Close. Crashing claps of thunder boomed in its depths, the sound so loud that the Aspect winced and backed away, shaking her head as if to clear it of ringing tones.

The creature leaped again, this time taking a bite from Araluen's side. Again, light spilled forth from the wounded avatar, and again the rotting creature's flesh boiled in the light, and it retreated. The Aspect hacked at it with her sword for good measure, using the flat of her divinely fashioned blade. Its impact caused the creature to shudder and squeal, but it did not further subdivide.

The gesticulating portion of the Rotting Man pointed straight above at the boiling green cloud. In answer, six jagged bolts of lightning ripped from the clouds belly, each one finding its target: the Aspect. The blast was too searing for sight to survive, and the wind that followed knocked every creature flat that stood within a hundred feet. The shock wave shredded the mist that still clung around the periphery of the space, whipping it away in steaming ribbons, revealing the entire space of the Close.

Araluen crawled forth from the crater that had opened at her feet. The crystal horn on her forehead seemed somewhat dimmer than before, but the blaze of her sword was yet bright. The lesser portion of the Rotting Man was nowhere to be seen. The greater portion cursed anew as he saw the Aspect emerging from what he had hoped was her grave.

The slime hardened, stretched, and transmuted itself into yet another form, that one more heinous than the last. It was a great twining serpent with ebony scales and with eyes like dark pits of space that ate light—twin vortexes of nothingness.

Free of the crater, Araluen again spoke forth ringing words of

power and touched her blade to the buckled pavement. A white flame surged down the blade, continued across the space separating her from the Rotting Man in serpent's shape, and flared into a nova of fire. The serpent screamed as its scales ignited and its breath burned it from within. Still shrieking it leaped forward, out of the fire, and still burning, it charged the Aspect. Its teeth were like daggers, its claws swords, and its wings a tornado.

Araluen smote at the snaking neck but missed. The Rotting Man was upon her, biting and raking with his claws. Araluen dropped her sword, and her hands found the Talontyr's neck. The crystal horn on her forehead began to blaze with light, a light similar to that which accompanied her transformation from Daughter to Aspect. The dark wells of the Rotting Man's eyes drank all the light, but there was yet more to give. The light flared; the darkness expanded. The ground shook.

The shining horn pierced the Rotting Man's side, and all was tumult.

!©!

When the ground finally ceased its shuddering, the celestial lights faded, the hellish dark cleared, and the thundering detonations echoed their last, the Aspect proved the mightier that day.

Marrec had watched the entire battle, when it wasn't obscured by releases of energy too extreme even for one accustomed to powers of divine magnitude.

With Marrec stood his friends Ususi and Gunggari.

Elowen, barely living, yet drew breath and would only grow the stronger with the cleric's healing attention.

Of the Rotting Man, only the memory of his final words remained, as he fled the field of battle, "I yield only for this moment."

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Araluen was much diminished from her struggle. She stood apart from the others, gazing about the Close, which was visible following the dispersing mist.

The Aspect said, "The Rotting Man is gone from this place, but he is not beaten. Talona's Chosen was chastised, but his power was not broken."

"Ash... I mean, Araluen," said Marrec, "I don't understand. You defeated the Talontyr, we saw you."

The Aspect, having taken the form of a tall, lithe woman smiled sadly. "The effort it cost me to free my greater self from the cystborn curse was not insignificant. Retrieving myself from the Rotting Man's influence was an awful trial, though one which I could not have begun without your timely assistance, kind Marrec:"

The cleric's face reddened.

Araluen continued, "But I succeeded, finally. What power remained to me was called immediately to the fore when I faced the Rotting Man. As you saw, he carries much of Talona's power within him. I had to exhaust my stores just to chase him away. Had he known how much power I expended, he might have stayed to finish me, risking his own final annihilation."

"His strength is unchanged?" Marrec glanced around, studying the edges of the Close, making sure some new incursion was not even then creeping up unobserved.

"The Rotting Man, too, used much of his personal power just to control the form in which he put me. When I burst that control, that which he expended was wasted. While his act was pure evil, this project absorbed much

of his time and energy these last years that otherwise might have been put to more direct use, to the dismay of the Green Powers. Even though I was trapped and separated from myself, my entry into the world did, in truth, slow the Rotting Man and weaken him. Now all his best plans are in ruin. His most powerful minions, the blightlords, are slain; he'll have to recruit anew. His massed forces are scattered or killed; his strength is only a tenth of what he promised his mistress Talona, and she punishes failure."

All remained quiet for a moment to absorb the impact of the

Aspect's words, as well as wonder what form Talona's punishment might take.

Elowen said, her voice still weak from her ordeal, "Thank you, Araluen. If the Nentyarch were here, he would thank you, but you must accept my thanks in his place."

Araluen bowed her head graciously.

Gunggari was silent, his face betraying no reaction. Marrec knew his friend well enough to know that the Oslander showed respect through his reserve. Ususi, though also quiet, seemed strangely intimidated in the presence of Lurue's Aspect. Funny—she'd showed less fear when she dumped spell after spell upon the Daughter.

Araluen sighed, stretching. "It is hardly fair, is it? I am finally set free of the trap, but I lack the power to remain. I so looked forward to treading the forests of this world. I must depart whence I came." She sighed. "All of us must soldier on, doing our part, even one such as me."

"Lest I forget," added the Aspect, smiling fondly again, "Please give this to Hemish. Without his strength and goodness, all would have been lost long ago. His heartache at the loss of his child may be somewhat dampened if he can talk to me now and again."

The Aspect dropped a small object into Marrec's waiting hand. It appeared to be a figurine carved of crystal. The figure was that of a tiny unicorn.

She smiled, and light streamed from her form, suffusing all of them. The light was more than mere illumination. It was ... empowering. It was the power of Lurue. Within that gleam there was hope, salvation, and an offer of protection for the needy, forlorn, and forsaken. Also there was laughter, the satisfaction of quests completed, and wonder at all things. All who stood in the light knew that each of them, no matter their strengths and weaknesses, was worthy in the eyes of Lurue. Above all else, there was joy.

The Aspect turned her face one last time upon Marrec, saying "Search for the unicorn always, Marrec, and in the

pursuit, find happiness."

The cleric nodded, his face stern but his gaze watery.

The Aspect leaped upward, as lithe and bright as a shaft of light seeking to illuminate the heavens. It passed easily between a gap in the interwoven branches above and was gone.

Marrec brushed away a tear as he continued to gaze upward. "Goodbye, Ash."

IVJarrec and Ususi walked behind Elowen and Gunggari. Gunggari played upon his dizheri, Elowen laughing and sometimes clapping accompaniment. So they continued, slowly, taking the few days required, until they drew near the borders of Rawlinswood, to the south and west of where Dun-Tharos still sheltered in the heart of the forest. The journey back through the tangled forest was mostly uneventful, though they steered well clear of wells and other cavities that threatened a passage back into the Nar conjuries still below. All contemplated their touch with divinity. Indeed, all were touched. As the days of their journey toward Yeshelmaar passed, each noted slight changes in the other.

Gunggari was more talkative, as if the assurance of the Aspect's smile had somehow given him a measure of poise, where before simple

reserve had always sufficed. On the other hand, Elowen took more time for introspection before speaking her mind, though as ever, the elf was still quick to find a bit of joy and wonder in the sight of a growing thing or forest creature. Ususi also seemed somewhat kinder in her dealings with the others, as if some bitterness was finally dulled. The mage was more thoughtful, and her biting remarks had yet to reappear.

For his part, Marrec was simply happier. He was happier not only because his contact with Lurue was as strong and steady as it had ever been, but also because he felt more a whole man for the first time that he could recall. He could

accept his heritage, despite its monstrous origin. All that was required was one last remuneration.

It was Thanial, of course, his old mentor—Thanial, who had accidentally fallen afoul of Marrec's gaze, the kind forest ranger, whose stone-entombed body was shattered and its pieces strewn far and wide.

"I've never heard you whistle before, Marrec, and I've known you long," commented Gunggari.

"The tune is rather a happy one, too," noted Ususi, her lips trying on a smile, which was becoming a less rare sight.

"Well, I don't know the name of the tune. I'm just whistling because the mood struck me, that's all. Plus, before she left, Ash gave me knowledge I didn't know that I wanted, but now that I have it, I see that it is nothing less than essential."

Elowen raised an eyebrow, inquisitive.

"It's Thanial. I thought him destroyed forevermore, his fragments scattered beyond recovery, but Ash has given me special insight. I know where every last chunk, fragment, stone, and pebble of Thanial lies, across the entire span of Faerfln. Some are scattered strangely far, but I know even of them."

Ususi began to nod, but Elowen said, "So?"

"I have been given the gift of salvation, and Thanial's, too. Once I have collected all the pieces, I can meld them into a whole, and once whole, my old mentor can be released from his mineral bondage."

Gunggari clapped Marrec on the back.

It was true. The knowledge of each stony fragment sparkled in his mind, divinely provided, and for all Marrec knew, given directly by Lurue herself, but passed down through her emissary, the Aspect.

-Slit was midsummer, but a fair day without scorching heat. Looking backward at the edge of the Rawlinswood, as it lay lower than the higher point to which they had ascended, they saw the white sun stretching out over the dark cloak of

the woods, the light penetrating shadows and turning shadow and darkness to the greenery of life. The sky was blue, but darkening swiftly as evening approached, with only a faint frosting of clouds high above, like white paint streaked across a cerulean canvas.

Yeshelmaar lay not too far distant, less than a day's walk away, should they choose to push themselves, but comfortable in each other's company, they chose instead to set camp early.

As the stars came out above, Gunggari began to play again on his dizheri. The song was one Marrec had heard the Oslander play before, but rarely. A salute to the stars, which the Oslander's people believed to be the spirits of their ancestors looking down upon them, guarding them, or at least available for advice, should they be asked.

Elowen and Ususi were talking quietly together. When Gunggari began his music, they finished speaking and made their way up to where the cleric reclined on a great rock.

Elowen said, "Ususi and I find ourselves at loose ends."
"Loose ends?"

Ususi responded, "I have the Keystone, which is what I've long sought, but gaining it, I have discovered that there are other things, too, beyond accumulation of knowledge, that are worth having."

"What's that?" wondered Marrec, frowning.

Elowen answered for Ususi, "Comradeship. Listen-now that the Rotting Man has been flushed from Dun Tharos, my priorities have shifted, too. For so long I have been focused on the Talontyr, but his threat is lessened. Like Ususi... I find that I prefer traveling with a group of friends instead of alone."

Comprehension dawned across the cleric's face. He shook his head, but a great contentment filled him up, causing him to laugh. "Then, two shall become four. We're off in the morning. First, we shall visit Hemish, to tell him of his little girl that grew up and give him the token Ash wanted him to

have. After that, we will search out the fragments of my past misstep. Thanial will enjoy meeting all of you."

Marrec stood. The three, discussing their plans for the morrow, strode over to where the Oslander continued to play. Gunggari's notes danced into the night sky. The stars twinkled their approval.

Lady of Poison

Page 135 of 153